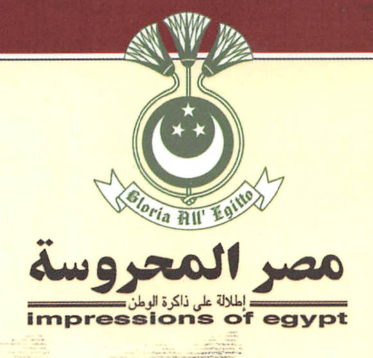


A FLIGHT OF KITES

GROWING OUT OF THE NASSER YEARS

Fayza Hassan

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GROWING OUT OF THE NASSER YEARS

A MEMOIR, 1938-1968

Fayza Hassan

To my mother
1913 - 2003

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PROLOGUE

Memoirs purport to tell the truth: that is allegedly their primary motive. Not this one. My relationship with "the truth" has always been unconventional, to say the least. A moment occurs; once it has passed, it produces endless reactions, interpretations, visions and recollections to be stored, digested and regurgitated later. Like fodder, it is transformed by the process of assimilation. Witnesses' depositions repeatedly demonstrate the fluid nature of what we rigidly insist on calling facts, naively asserting their immutability. I have no such pretensions. My recollections are purely subjective. This is not the account of who we really were or what we actually did, but only of what I remember, the way I remember it. The truth, if such a thing does in fact exist, is only one of several options. When events and characters are at odds with my narrative, I have made the necessary adjustments. Had I written under changed circumstances – in another time, another place – I have no doubt that my story would have been coloured differently.

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Few members of my generation, which came of age at the apex of the Nasser years, have walked the royal path toward grandeur with heads held high. I have often wondered why. Were we not born with the proverbial silver spoon in our mouths? Were we cheated, or did we cheat ourselves? Is our mediocre collective performance the result of the political upheaval that was our lot as we were growing up? Were we hindered by archaic customs and parental heavy-handedness, a system that kept grown children hostage to their parents' will and fortune even as regimes crumbled and changed? Did centuries of colonisation weaken our genes? Was it a bit of this and a bit of that? My own track record seems to have been rather mottled at best.

Today, I suddenly walked out of a lucrative job, determined never to return. For twelve long years, I sincerely believed that I loved what I was doing: writing what I was told to write, suppressing my opinions whenever they did not suit my superiors. I became able to argue a point and then its opposite. I was well appreciated and thought of as trustworthy.

A futile altercation informed me that I had neglected to read the signs on the wall and that the decision to quit had been waiting to happen. I had been suffocating, yet was too much of a coward to acknowledge the discomfort. A minute before I took this unexpected step, everything had been normal: that is, as boring and slightly irritating as usual. If I felt anything other than pure joy after reading my employers the riot act, it was dismay at how little I was able to predict my reactions. How, I wondered as I stormed out of the building, had I put up with the aggravation so willingly for so long? Then my grandmother's words came to mind: "Man submits readily to hardship. The only thing he cannot stand is happiness."

When my mother found out what I had just done, her only slightly disgusted comment was, "prone to coups de tête (sudden changes of mind) as usual. Every time you have it all you can't wait to throw it away." But had I ever had it all?

Now that, as an authentic adult, I have liberated myself for the first time from both stifling authority and time-consuming, irrelevant labour, I can indulge in a universal craving: to probe the past. Not in justification; I finally have managed to rid myself of inbred guilt. It is more a case of renewed curiosity in what are considered the golden years of one's life, a time when one was supposedly "free to choose," make the decisions that would influence our future momentously, take the first major steps that would lead to all the glorious other ones.

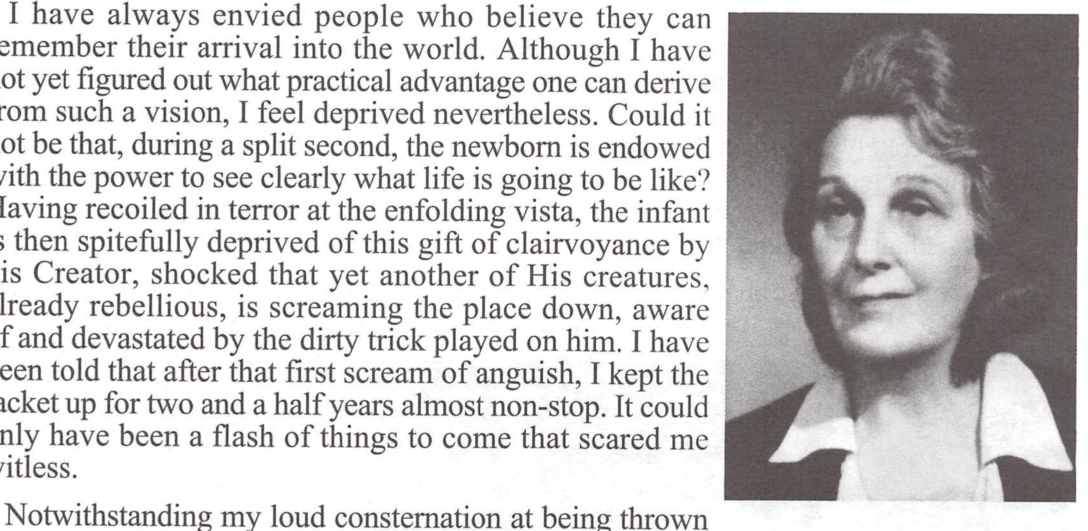
I was born in a world where order prevailed. Social status and wealth were preordained. People lived and died in the same houses and religion was not dished out through loudspeakers to daze the masses. I felt secure in my niche, but watched its surroundings fall apart as I came of age. Until then, the most important event in my life had been the remote Palestine War, the most prominent person my mother, and my favourite place our house and its garden. During the months preceding our flight towards more politically-friendly shores, my husband, my baby daughter and I dwelt in the house with my parents for a while. I used to stand on the terrace with my husband and watch the birds I called "our kites" in the eucalyptus tree. He was thrilled when they flew away, so efficient and powerful; I was happy when I saw them returning to their nests. We too ventured out once, to feed our young; and we too eventually made it back home. Not unlike our kites, when we finally reached the end of the journey, we found our nest destroyed. I still sorely miss it.



The three of us at the beach with Mother

BEGINNINGS

I have always envied people who believe they can remember their arrival into the world. Although I have not yet figured out what practical advantage one can derive from such a vision, I feel deprived nevertheless. Could it not be that, during a split second, the newborn is endowed with the power to see clearly what life is going to be like? Having recoiled in terror at the enfolding vista, the infant is then spitefully deprived of this gift of clairvoyance by his Creator, shocked that yet another of His creatures, already rebellious, is screaming the place down, aware of and devastated by the dirty trick played on him. I have been told that after that first scream of anguish, I kept the racket up for two and a half years almost non-stop. It could only have been a flash of things to come that scared me witless.



Nenna

Notwithstanding my loud consternation at being thrown into what I must already have figured out was an nasty place, I was born willy nilly just before the Second World War at the French Hospital in Abbassiya, the most prestigious such institution in Cairo at the time. It offered the services of a charismatic professor in obstetrics who was mainly adept at restoring his clients' confidence in their physical appeal, when it wavered as a result of momentarily distended waistlines. Upon hearing that I was a girl, Father did not bother to visit my mother at once, but only came the next day, forgetting to bring flowers.

The circumstances of my birth put me in the red before I could really build respectable assets. As soon as I was old enough to understand, Maman told me over and over about the excruciating pain that accompanied my arrival. "I screamed for two days," she said, her voice wavering at the memory. "I wanted to die. I never knew such agony existed. It was the worst time of my life." Confusedly, I felt that I was expected to consider myself responsible for having subjected her to such an ordeal, undoubtedly the whole point of her frequently repeated narrative. My father's bitter disappointment at the poor result of the misery she had endured had only added to her dolours. His reaction was understandable though: I was his fourth girl.

I wondered how I could ever make it up to both my parents. I already sensed that I never would – not to them, and not to the rest of the world, upon which I had descended against my best judgment, and obviously to no one's particular benefit. Thus was a sense of worthlessness born with which I have battled for a long time, with mixed results at best. But as I grew up, my inordinate need for fun and excitement kept standing in the way of any sincere desire to rise above my irrelevance. It still does to this day, as I enter the troisième âge, erasing any feelings of responsibility for being here or remorse at whatever damage I may have caused. I didn't ask to be born, after all; actually, I almost believe I am owed an apology.

Almost from the start, I was endowed with the power of ruining my parents' lives. It had taken Maman over two years to become pregnant, and if Papa was less than bowled over by the new girl on the block (his other three daughters were from a previous marriage), she was extremely happy to have managed a child at all. When I was around a month old, my parents invited my maternal grandmother (known to us as Nenna) to spend the summer with them in Alexandria. There, I became ill. At first the doctors made light of my indisposition, but instead of getting better, I proceeded to prove them wrong. I began to wane rapidly. Professional nurses were called in to care for me around the clock – Maman not being versed in caring for a newborn intent on giving her the slip – while my parents desperately tapped all Alexandria's medical resources. Having exhausted the local talents, they began summoning reputed professors from the capital, on the misguided assumption that they knew better. I was even honoured with the visit of King Farouk's favoured pediatrician. They turned out to be equally clueless.

As was often the case in our family, superstition prevailed over reason and Maman eventually took it out on my father, whom she accused of not having wanted me in the first place. God was taking me back, she screamed, and it was his entire fault. Father was irked at such unfairness, but decided with commendable wisdom that this was not the time to argue and, instead, did his very best to calm his young wife. My cot was decorated with blue stones, and trinkets purported to ward off the evil eye. Finally a specialist gathered enough courage to tell my parents the truth about my chances of survival, which according to him were close to nil. Maman was shattered. Nenna, with her usual flair, chose this particular moment to engage in a shouting match with the night nurse, whom she had caught sleeping on the job. After a brawl in which everyone participated vigourously, my grandmother announced: "Either the nurse goes, or I do." When Maman hinted that she needed the professional caregiver more, Nenna took the first train to Cairo. As it was, I changed my mind and refused to die on cue, to the bafflement of all concerned, but for a long time after this minor miracle, there was great uneasiness among the participants in a drama of which I had been, for a brief time, the innocent star.



With Mother at the Orman gardens

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My very first memories are of the worried look on Maman's face as she lifted me out of my cot in the middle of night. I heard the air raid sirens shrieking as the lights were hastily turned out and we tumbled to the basement in the dark. Very quickly, Maman ceased to join us in our nocturnal flights, and stayed upstairs, eating mangoes. I have since associated the perfume of mangoes with the sound of anti-aircraft artillery. Maman

had found out that she was pregnant again and believed that the baby she was expecting would protect her from harm in some magical way. She was hoping for a boy this time (another miracle), and superstitiously refused to show too much concern or be too protective of the unborn creature. If she did, God might punish her and she would miscarry – or, worse, give birth to another girl. This is why she refused to go to the basement, which was musty and uncomfortable anyway. I was sent downstairs with Nenna and Papa, who carried the pillows and blankets. They would make a bed for me, and then he, leaving me in my grandmother's care, would return to his wife.

After every air raid, I was presented with a new doll. Maman had told me that the noise I feared so much was that of a ship arriving from Europe laden with toys. This creative explanation had the merit of teaching me that every pleasure was preceded by a measure of discomfort. By the time the war ended I had an impressive collection of dolls as well as a new brother and sister.

I distinctly recall the secrecy that surrounded my brother Karim's birth. I was about to turn four. I don't think I had noticed Maman's changed shape; nor, for fear of disappointment, did she ever mention the new arrival in front of me. What was to follow came therefore as a total surprise.

I was awakened at dawn by hushed voices outside my room, which alerted me to the fact that something strange was going on, albeit not another air raid. I called out and instead of Maman, it was Father who materialised at my side. "Go back to sleep," he whispered and awkwardly pushed something hairy into my hands. "Turn the light on, please, Papa," I asked him in my nicest voice. He made firm, negative noises. I was dying to see what he had given me. I was not used to receiving either attention or presents from him. There was no point in making a scene, however; nor would I switch the lights on myself once he was gone. Father never took any nonsense from me and I had learned very early on to act meek and mild. "It is a doll," he said gruffly. "You'll see it tomorrow." Before I could think of a convincing objection, he had closed the door behind him. I lay in the dark, trying to make out the shape of his present. It had long ears, and was therefore a rabbit, but I could not find the pompon tail. Could it be a donkey? There again, the necessary hind appendage was missing. Running my fingers around the object, I encountered something flat, cold and hard. It seemed to be situated at the back of the head. I promptly put my hand under the blanket. This was not what I had expected. It should have had a soft, hairy head like any other cuddly toy. Slowly, I sat up. By this time my eyes had become accustomed to the semi-darkness. I could make out a rabbit in a waistcoat and trousers lying on the blanket. I gathered enough courage to gingerly turn it over. There it was: a face with a nose, a mouth, and forever-open, painted eyes. The backside of the rabbit was a doll dressed in the same suit. "A monster," I whispered to myself. I felt deep compassion and a little disgust for the thing. I was appalled that someone could have dreamt up such a deformity. How could it ever sleep without one of the faces choking in the pillows, I wondered. Were there real people going around with a face at the back of their head? I had never seen any, but then again maybe I had just not looked carefully enough. Nenna always wore a scarf on her head … and she saw everything, even the faces I made behind her back … all these thoughts were rather unsettling. I pushed the toy away, trying not to let it touch me, and probably fell asleep.

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The next day, Nenna and the nanny came into my room to help me get dressed. "If you hurry with your breakfast, I will show you something you have never seen before in your life," said my grandmother. "I saw it already," I told her, pointing toward the foot of my bed where Papa's present lay stiffly, half hidden by the bed sheets. Nenna picked up the doll and, turning it around, seemed quite startled. "Yesus, Maria, Yosef," she gasped and looked at me, unable to comment further. "No," she finally said, "it is something really beautiful; come with me." I was taken to Maman's room and immediately spotted the cot next to the bed. It had not been there the day before. I stared at the light blue bundle of blankets for a while, decided that the pink face emerging from it belonged to a baby, then moved around the cot, trying to glimpse the back of the creature's head. I was expecting to see Peter Rabbit grinning his toothy grin at me. "What are you looking at?" asked Maman, puzzled. "He is a boy, and soon he will be able to play with you." When I was reassured that the head was normal, only covered in a dark down as I knew it should be, I felt immense happiness. I had a new brother, and he had just one face.

I don't recall my sister's birth, although I was a whole year older when it happened. Somehow one day she appeared, and then we were three.

For a long time, I believed that my brother and sister, born at the time of the air raids, were toys that had been brought on the ship for my enjoyment. I treated them as such. It never occurred to me that I should be jealous of them in any way. All I wanted was to use them as dolls since I had realised that they were far superior to any plaything I ever had. My parents were a little cagey about letting me handle the babies, but I did my best to circumvent their attention.

I clearly see myself standing over Karim's cot when he was just a few months old and feeding him Marie biscuits from my packet. He was quite the little glutton and went through all my offerings in no time. Every time he finished a biscuit, I clapped my hands in approval and he gurgled gleefully. I was quite proud of myself and felt like a real mother until his eyes glazed over, his mouth opened and he threw up everything he had just stuffed into his tiny stomach. When Maman discovered that I was responsible, I was sternly told to concentrate on my dolls from now on, and had to wait until the storm blew over to resume my maternal activities. To show the little imp that he had betrayed me, however, and that I was not about to forget, I would wave pastries under his nose until he extended his little hand, then withdraw the treat, shaking my head, and go through the motions of vomiting. I don't think he understood my pantomime, but I believe he began to distrust me, which made teasing him all the more fun.

As soon as he could walk and gargle a few words, my brother became an infinite source of delight and experimentation. I adored the way he replaced the sounds "je" and "se" by "ze" and I spent hours on end making up new sentences that contained the difficult letters and forcing him to say them. I also loved tickling him until he almost choked from laughter, and once encouraged him to lick two fingers and push them into the holes of the socket of my bedside lamp. I had just tried it myself and received a jolt that had scared me at first, but had perversely repeated the experiment several times and ended up enjoying it. Being electrocuted was not the little boy's idea of pleasure, however, and on this occasion he proved to be an authentic crybaby. I had to explain to Maman what had happened when his screams brought her running into our room. I

decided that I did not need to elaborate on my own role in the incident, though, and got off with a light "can't you watch your brother properly just for a few minutes?" which I did not overly resent. I had to clean up my act when he began to talk in sentences, nevertheless, and I was forced to use less overt ways when "inspiring" him to do forbidden things, because as soon as he understood that I was the leading force behind most of his mishaps, I caught him ratting on me. Not long after the discovery of my perfidy, he allied himself with our baby sister Farida, who, though almost two years younger, took on the task of protecting him.

Very early on, Farida showed that our Germanic ancestors had not been drowned by African/Arab blood. She may have missed out on our mother's milky complexion and baby-blond hair, but she was Prussian in demeanour. Only the strict truth satisfied her. She subscribed to a linear philosophy and, in my opinion, like our Germanic ancestors, lacked creative vision. If she had worked seriously on her stories before telling on me, I would have forgiven her and tried to win her over. But no: she had to tell it exactly as it was. I did not mind my mother's coming after me as much as I regretted my sister's narrow-mindedness. This rift between us took more than half a century to heal. She thought I was a liar; I considered myself an interior decorator, changing the furniture of my perceptions until a new arrangement pleased me. I rarely did away with a large chunk of truth, but what was wrong with placing it more prominently or on the contrary, concealing it from view for overall effect? Farida did not appreciate nuances. It had to be either black or white. In my case, it was usually the former. Only recently have we admitted that we each have our own style and accepted that the lion can learn to make friends with the snake.

Karim, on the other hand, showed a propensity to go it alone and, while accepting Farida's protection, was not averse to fibbing to her whenever convenient. Like me, he used the truth as a tool but was more successful at hiding his infractions, mainly because he was not an artist or born storyteller, revelling in the perfection of his own version of events. Unlike me, he did not need a public, but operated on a strictly opportunistic basis. From early on thus, our brotherly love was fraught with intricate resentment and rivalries, giving Maman a chance to play each of us off against the others. Our beloved mother's favourite motto was divide and rule.

HAPPY DAYS

I often thought that I should have benefited from the climate of euphoria in which a certain class of Egyptians bathed during and just after the war, and grown into a reasonably optimistic child, but somehow my fairy godmother forgot to bestow such a gift upon me. I was left with the daunting task of developing this essential quality on my own. As a baby, I exhibited a teary, pusillanimous disposition. My first awareness of myself as a person, distinct from others, is connected with a sick, sinking feeling in my stomach, caused by Maman's heady perfume as she kissed me goodnight on her way out to join Papa in some nightspot. Very early on I guessed that the fragrance was a harbinger of unpleasant things to come and soon connected it with her absence. I wanted her to stay with me and was prepared to do what it took to prevent her departure. This included hollering at the top of my voice and making various choking sounds. Still a toddler, I was quickly learning the art of manipulation.

I remember waking up often in the middle of the night. It was dark in my room, but there was a light burning in the corridor and I could make out the little petrol lamp through the unpolished glass panes of the door. Using a petrol lamp when we had electricity was one of my father's idiosyncratic manifestations of stinginess. It was put away only after a burglar who had entered the house through the bathroom window



At home in Dokki

got hold of it. He was making his way down the corridor when he was confronted with my grandmother. He threw the lamp at her and took to his heels. The lamp shattered and the flame went out. Terrified by the sudden darkness, the poor woman screamed, rousing the whole household at once. The intruder was never found, but an electric night-light was installed in the corridor.

By listening carefully, I could tell at once if something unusual was taking place. I had been awakened by the silence, a lull in the constant murmur of Maman and Nenna's voices, punctuated by the sound of their knitting needles. On normal nights, I knew that my father was out as usual with "them" (my stepsisters). As I drifted back to sleep, I would faintly make out the sound of the front door opening and closing; then soon after, I would hear my father's footsteps resounding on the polished wooden floor of the hall. At that moment, I was always overcome with a feeling of total happiness. I revelled in the reassurance that everything was all right. A few minutes later I used to hear my grandmother and my mother busying themselves over the small stove in the corridor, and delicious smells of reheated stew would waft under the door.

The scenario changed, however, on the rare occasions when my mother accompanied my father out on his nocturnal forays. I was left in the care of my grandmother and the nanny, and, though they sat outside my room knitting and chatting, the rhythm of the conversation, vastly different from the one I was used to, disturbed me in my sleep. I'd call out then and hear a flurry of noises behind my bedroom door. Shadows – not my mother's, I was sure – approached, disappeared, returned once more. My keepers were trying to decide if I was likely to go back to sleep of my own accord, and if not, how to handle the scene that was bound to follow the discovery of my mother's absence.

From the start, I had suspected that Nenna and I were competing for Maman's favours and I had also been aware that her undemanding, almost self-effacing love was far superior to the selfishly possessive feelings I harboured. I was often overcome by jealousy to the point of throwing a terrible tantrum for no reason. I never let on why I was so angry, nor did I talk about my outbursts with anyone. I could not bring myself to face the burning rage that tightened my chest whenever I happened to see the two women chatting intimately. My mother was mine and mine alone, I reasoned. Why did she spend so much time with her mother when she was already a grownup? I already had to share Maman's attention with my brother and sister. That did not disturb me because I considered them mine, like my dolls, and was allowed to help care for them. I was never sent to play with my toys when they were being dressed or fed. This only happened when the two women wanted to be alone. I always did my best to interrupt their tête-à-têtes, running in and out of my room to complain about my nanny, whine that I had a headache, or demand to be fed. Nenna's ironic gaze invariably informed me that she was not fooled by my antics. She said nothing to me but spoke to her daughter in German, and the two women would laugh. I could not believe that Maman did not understand what was going on. Her mother was trying to separate us, I tried to tell her with my eyes (I did fear my grandmother's scolding); but she only smiled and told me to run along and play. If I was good for a while, she might come and read me a story, she used to promise. She seldom did.

By the time I was three, I became convinced that Nenna's alleged vindictiveness bloomed to the full whenever Maman left the house. On these occasions, obviously

unpracticed in children's shrewdness, she used to don my mother's housecoat, a silky, dark blue, floor-length robe adorned with huge pink chrysanthemums and fragrant with her unmistakable perfume. In her daughter's delicate stiletto-heeled mules, she hesitantly negotiated the obstacles and hid in my darkened room as soon as she realised that I was fully awake and intent on making her life difficult. She hummed my favourite lullaby, the one my mother always sang when I took more time than usual falling asleep. This was a lullaby for special occasions, for when I was sick or sad, and I considered that my grandmother had no right at all to hijack it. This was our secret song. How did Nenna know about it? Only my mother could have told her. I felt betrayed and hated her and wished she'd never come back. Then the thought that this might actually happen terrified me. I tried to feel "without mother" and within seconds I was sobbing hysterically. Nenna had no choice but to make her presence known and begin playing scene one, in Maman's voice. I don't think she ever believed she fooled me, but if she did, my piercing screams should have disillusioned her promptly. I suspected, however, that in a perverse way, she enjoyed my discomfiture. My mother was not coming, her mocking voice seemed to tell me, as she sang the lullaby, which now sounded like a celebratory hymn. My mother had betrayed me and she was the accomplice, privy to Maman's secret intention to abandon me. She had known all along what was about to happen and instead of warning me, had helped put me to sleep by chatting with Maman behind the door as if nothing extraordinary was taking place. How was I to know that they had not been maligning "him" (my father) as usual, but instead, discussing ways of controlling me if I woke up? I could have choked on my rage and pretended that I had trouble breathing. I wished with all my heart that I could be dead by the time my mother came back. That would teach her.

The nanny was no more successful in consoling me than Nenna and usually did not try very hard. It was clear that she saw me as disgustingly spoiled and couldn't wait for the comedy to end, allowing her to go to bed. I made sure to keep the clamour up, coughing and wheezing and making an utter fool of myself, until I heard the front door open, whereupon I lapsed into deep, pitiful hiccups with the hope that my mother would hear me. I was less keen on attracting my father's attention, since he did not take kindly to these exaggerated displays. When my parents entered the house after a night out, I always remembered that there was little love lost between my father and me, but I did not really care. All that mattered was my mother. "Why, why, did you go and leave me?" I had learned how to whimper as she tiptoed into the room, looking worried. I tried to sound terminally ill, mortally wounded, but forgiving. In this I had a role model: all I had to do was give a reasonable rendition of my grandmother's act when she wanted to let my mother know that someone (usually Father) had hurt her feelings. "I will never sleep again," I often added, as if to myself, intending to terrify her. When she did not react, "I think I have a fever" was bound to produce the desired result. I had already cottoned on to the fact that sick people were entitled to all of Mother's tender care. I did such a good job on the whole that soon she gave up on her outings. The price, she said, was more than she was willing to pay. My father, however, was not deterred, and for years, even after my brother and sister were born, I would wake up a few minutes before his arrival, and smile secretly at the thought that my mother had not gone out with him.

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Father was more annoyed than I knew by my play-acting. Indeed, he was not overwhelmed by me generally, having raised three other daughters before I was born. He knew all the tricks. He might have been more forgiving had I been a boy. I was not, and he was frustrated by my constant scenes. He told me later that during the first years of my life, my mother had abandoned any pretense at having an interesting conversation, and regaled him instead with the events of her day as a mother. Her sexy nightgowns were stained with milk and instead of smelling of Schiaparelli's Shocking (we had both been fond of this perfume, he for the scent, I for the incredibly dainty bottle in the form of a female body, its neck decked with colourful enamelled flowers), he often perceived a faint whiff of vomit when he kissed her. Worse still, she frequently refused to perform her wifely duties, claiming that she was too tired after a long day with the baby.

If I was so far only confusedly aware of my power to create a rift between my parents, one incident confirmed my ability to sway events to my advantage. One evening, my father arrived unexpectedly, earlier than usual. He found me lying next to my mother in the marital bed. Usually when I fell asleep she would carry me to my cot, which she wheeled into my room before his arrival. My father did not approve of children sleeping in their parents' beds. "Take her to her room," he told my mother that night. She protested that I was not asleep yet, and that I would scream if she moved me now. He had to be patient. Nenna was fixing him something to eat. By the time he had eaten, everything would be in order. Father was tired and wanted no dinner; all he had been looking forward to was a good night's sleep, he argued. Was he not entitled to sleep in his own bed? I remember following the dialogue very carefully, anxious to retain my privilege despite his irritation. Finally they agreed to place me in my cot, on my mother's side of the bed. I was rather scared of my father, especially of his voice when he was angry, and I stopped myself from howling at this arrangement, which deprived me of the main part of my rights. Instead, I began to whisper over and over, "make him go away, please mummy, make him go away." Suddenly, Father leapt out of bed, grabbed me, lifted me close to his face and looked at me sternly, probably wondering what to do next. Holding me under one arm, he roughly dragged my cot into my room, dumped me in it and left, slamming the door behind him. I was so dumbfounded that I could not find my voice. My mother arrived almost at once, carrying her pillow and a blanket. She made up the bed in which she slept whenever I was sick and needed to be watched all night. Soon I was cuddling up against her, quite conscious that I had won a major victory. Maman never went back to sleeping in the big bedroom and this became "our" room. Later, the three of us were allowed to share the big bed with her.

I had managed to impress Maman, but with Papa it was a different story. I always had a difficult relationship with him. He usually pretended I did not exist, except when he was enjoining me to keep quiet. Our rapport never improved, and I think that I still carry within me the scars of a failed connection with the most important man in a girl's life. That may be at the root of my fierce refusal to yield to arbitrary male authority, yet seek it all the time. What I have sorely needed and never obtained of course, is unconditional male approval.

In those early years, the intuitive awareness that Father was not pleased with me exacerbated my rebellious streak. I vaguely sensed that I represented an obstacle and feared that he might want to get rid of me. I had no intention of being disposed of without a fight. Instead of using coy, girlish little manners and turning on the charm,

however, I dug my heels in and became completely uncooperative. The German nurse who had been hired to look after my brother used to hint at my imminent fall from grace with unconcealed glee. "Now that he has a boy," she told my Greek nanny once, "he will certainly not be interested in having this one around; such a fussy, whiney child! And you, my dear, should not expect any favours." She was trying to make it clear that her own status in the house was superior, but if my nanny only shrugged at her words, I misinterpreted their meaning completely and registered the blow with unspoken alarm.

Schwester Anna had come to us directly from the royal palace, where she had been in charge of the personnel that looked after the three princesses. She knew the damage the absence of a male heir was doing to King Farouk's relationship with Queen Farida. She suspected – correctly – that all Egyptians wanted to give birth to boys.

I still shudder sometimes at the recollection of the cold rage with which Father contemplated me the day I tiptoed into the room I shared with my brother, while he was asleep. I was four and a half then, and the baby was just a few months old. I intended to retrieve my new coloured pencils from the desk. "Don't go in there," Papa had hissed. "You will wake your brother up." Confident that I wouldn't, I had proceeded with my finger on my lips, indicating that I would not make a sound. Suddenly Father had me by the collar. He shook me and pushed me away, then, on second thought, removed his slipper to spank me, coming after me in hot pursuit. I ran for my life and hid under my parents' bed, where I knew he could not reach me. After he had calmed down, I crept out, wanting to ask for his forgiveness. His eyes stopped me. It was clear that he was still upset. I misread his momentary anger and gathered that Schwester Anna was right. This impression heralded a long period during which I became so clumsy in his presence that he claimed I spilt things, fell down and bumped into furniture on purpose, just to make him angry.

Allegedly deprived of my Papa's love, I tried to win Maman's unconditional approval. I performed like a little monkey in the hope that I could bring a smile to her lips. I became a terrible gossip, spying on the servants and reporting to her what they said about her and the Bey. If I did not feel that the truth was impressive enough, I had no problem embellishing it. I would have done anything to attract Maman's attention. But while my mind was already rather agile, my body eventually betrayed me, and after "the accident" I resigned myself to having lost her esteem as well.

On that fateful afternoon, I was wearing a white angora jumpsuit, with a little white bonnet of the same wool hiding my curly hair. I was the White Rabbit and was aware of Maman's pride in the way I looked. It must have been a severe winter day, because I remember being cold despite the warm garment and rather surprised that she did not fuss over me as usual, asking me if I was comfortable or if I wanted to go home. I am standing next to Maman on a shiny parquet floor in a strange apartment. She is all dressed up in a grey fur coat, fine leather gloves and her bibi, a little grey hat adorned with a fluffy white feather, impertinently perched on her head. We are waiting to be let into someone's office. Suddenly, I realise that I want to go to the bathroom. I pull on my mother's hand. She sternly orders me to stop. I obey and squeeze my legs together as hard as I can. After a few minutes, the urge is so imperative that I feel sweat trickling down my face. I am hot and cold in turns and a little dizzy. I shiver a couple of times. My will power is useless, I can't hold on any more. "Maman," I beg. At that very moment,

the door of the office opens and she pushes me in. She is all smiles, shaking a gentleman's hand, sitting gracefully on the proffered armchair, accepting a cup of weak tea. I am still standing near the door, my mouth slightly open, breathing hard and wondering if the warm liquid will ever stop flowing down my legs. I watch, mesmerised, the puddle in which my patent leather shoes are now bathing, making its way slowly towards the gentleman's desk and disappearing under it. If I say nothing, maybe they will not notice, I think in a panic. But he does. "Oh, oh, I think we have had a small accident here," he says kindly. Maman looks at me and it finally dawns on her that I have just disgraced her. What happens next is rather hazy. All I can recall is Maman apologising profusely and the man assuring her that it is quite all right, he knows how it is, he has children himself... and how charmed he is to have met her... he will look into it, not to worry, he is sure her mother will be able to keep the apartment...

I was not aware then that this incident was a typical example of the kind of relationship I was doomed to have with Maman for most of my life.

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My family lived in a big house set in a little garden, in Doqqi, one of Cairo's newly created suburbs. The Egyptian elite hired foreign architects to build them European-looking villas there, but my father had not gone so far. He had bought the house ready-made from people who had not been able to pay the remaining instalments.

Our family house's most prominent feature was its inability to accommodate all of us comfortably. In that, it resembled most of the "elegant" villas of the time: all façade, with little thought or expense allotted to practical fixtures and fittings. This building principle had been adopted since Khedive Ismail, in the previous century, had attempted to europeanise his ancient capital on the double, in time for the grand opening of the Suez Canal. A wall of seemingly opulent Italianate constructions had concealed the unsightly quarters from the visitors' view. In the same spirit of economy, and to hasten the building of the fabulous Cairo Opera House, planned to rival the Scala of Milan, the upper structure had been made of stucco-covered wood, one of the reasons it went up in flames several times. In the 1930s, the Opera House was still intact, however, and its design an object of admiration, leading builders to concentrate their attention on the looks rather than the soundness and comfort of their constructions. For the best part of a century, until the Nasserist regime began to promote the unsightly and user-unfriendly bunkers that remain the hallmark of its architecture, villas and apartment blocks generally featured grandiose outer walls, often enclosing unremarkable and poorly conceived interiors.

Recently, a friend of mine recounted that in the early 1980s he had visited one of Anwar El-Sadat's newly established satellite cities. Among the shabbily constructed blocks of flats (known as masaken sha'biya: popular dwellings) a few looked unusually attractive and of a much superior building standard than the rest. They were all deserted, however. Intrigued, he inquired about the reason. He was told that they were make-believe apartments, constructed as a theatre set at the time of Sadat's first visit to the area. Since the contractors had not even started work on the project at the time when it was supposed to be finished, the architects had been forced to resort to this stratagem to give the president the impression that everything was proceeding on schedule. When he left, no one bothered to dismantle

the décor. Closer in style to royalty than to the Free Officers' lackluster pragmatism, Sadat had received the khedivial treatment.

Our villa was not a movie set, but it advertised more lavishness than it could ever deliver. At first, when Father bought it in 1935, it was a two-storey art deco affair, its most prominent sign of distinction a small tower attractively covered in red tiles. Inside, it had only one bathroom to each floor, the downstairs one adjoining the dining room, reserved for eventual dinner guests and lacking space for a water heater. The bathroom we all used was upstairs and did include a gas water-heating appliance of sorts, but it was a major cause of concern, given its propensity to produce minor explosions accompanied by an abundant emission of poisonous fumes. It had to do with the faulty way the pipes had been laid in the first place.

Father never bothered with it, since he was a proponent of cold baths, but it was a constant source of chagrin to Maman, who, under the circumstances, could not keep us children as spick and span as she might have wished. Baths were weekly protracted occurrences, with additional buckets of boiling water being brought from the kitchen and poured in the tub; but, since there were three of us, it was not unusual for the session to be terminated abruptly halfway through, because of the infrastructure's temperamental nature. As the eldest, I had to give precedence to my siblings. On the weeks I had missed out on my bath altogether, the girls at school complained to the teacher that I smelled. This added to my natural angst, but it never occurred to me at the time that I could pay them back for their scorn, voice a protest at home, or insist on more frequent ablutions. The problem was compounded by the fact that our school, located in a villa not unlike ours, also featured a single bathroom. We had to queue during recess to use it, and on a couple of occasions I did not quite make it. To avoid any more remarks about the smell, on those days, I would sit at the back of the class, pretending to have a headache. When I turned eleven, however, I finally rebelled and in an explosion of tears accused Maman of having sorely neglected my hygiene. She shrugged lightly, as she always did when she was about to admit that she had been less than perfect (but forgave herself before formulating any serious self-criticism): "Don't make a fuss," she told me. "A bath is a luxury. Many children never have one." She then launched into the account of the baths she had been forced to take, clad in a long robe to hide her naked body from her own eyes, when she was at boarding school. Maman had the knack of turning a situation to her favour, portraying herself as the aggrieved party regardless of the actual facts. She made me acknowledge that I really was luckier than most girls my age. I asked for her forgiveness and the incident was soon forgotten. I was nevertheless allowed more frequent use of the bathroom from then on. Someone (possibly Haniya, who had replaced Schwester Anna and Mary the Greek as our only nanny) actually discovered that it was possible – and not as taxing on the water heater – to have three quick showers in succession, every day.

The house had a special place in my heart despite its shortcomings. I always pictured it in my mind as a cozy nest where we were magically protected from the dangerous outside world. The lush greenery cascading from the balconies mixed with the flamboyant bougainvillea that flourished abundantly year round, hid the outer walls, and bolstered my fantasies. An earthquake that had been quite devastating for many other structures had left our villa unscathed, further proof that it was a haven.

In fact, it was quite ordinary, reflecting the social conceptions of well-to-do Egyptian families of the period, with the traditional division of private and public spaces. The ground floor was restricted to the family's dealings with outsiders: a hall of majestic proportions led to a formal salon on the right and a dining room on the left. Off the dining room, a small office with a private entrance afforded some privacy to a potentially studious member of the family. We had our Arabic lessons there, during which, bored to distraction, I counted the leaves of the tree growing in front of the window many times over. It was a very leafy fichus. Much later, unbeknownst to my parents, Karim, then a teenager, used the office as his garçonnière.

Off the hall, a corridor led to the bathroom with its freestanding white and pink bathtub, filled with potted plants (since it was never used for the purpose its manufacturer had intended), and a maid's room temporarily transformed into a storeroom. The kitchen and the servants' quarters were located in the basement, which communicated with the rest of the house by means of a narrow spiral staircase. Originally there had been a dumbwaiter to ease the burden on the servants, but one day it had broken down and sent the mulukhiya tureen thundering back into the kitchen, almost killing the cook. It had remained out of order since that unfortunate accident.

On the first floor, out of bounds to strangers, were our four bedrooms, a small hall, a large corridor and a rather vast landing off the servants' stairs, which formed a sort of den where they sat to drink tea and chat whenever they had a moment of respite. Concealed in a recess in the wall, I was able to hear their conversations clearly and make a mental note of any tidbit that I could use to enrich my frequent reports to Maman.

The house's main attractions were the numerous balconies with their rounded, chubby colonnades and lush potted ferns; the delicate art deco doors in light wood and carved glass panels; and the main staircase with its banister of heavy mahogany, which shone in the silvery light filtering through the huge bay window, an intricate combination of wrought iron and unpolished glass. The stairs themselves were an object of particular fascination, but only when they were being polished and the hideous beige carpet trimmed in dark red had been rolled up and removed. We would grab the golden metal rods used to hold the unsightly cover in place and have a quick game of fencing before our nannies wrenched the implements out of our hands and threatened to tell Papa. This carpet was long a symbol of the way my parents' generation thought of material possessions, which could be used but never abused. The cover was meant to protect the stairs from wear and tear caused by too many footsteps. A house was expected to last longer than a lifetime with the least possible maintenance. Changes were unthinkable and repairs a nuisance. Only after the revolution had brought such upheaval to their lives did our genitors begin to realise that they could be deprived of their décor and still manage to survive.

Our furniture came from Pontremoli, an exclusive shop on Qasr El-Nil Street that seems to have been single-handedly responsible for the French and Italian bourgeois style that prevailed in every middle-class home of the time, and featured unwieldy marquetry pieces adorned with important bronze inlays. Portly, heavy-bellied cabinets with vast drawers were a definite favourite. Papa had purchased the household fixtures to deck out his first conjugal apartment, on Soliman Pasha Street. When he remarried, he transported the lot to his new abode in Doqqi, adding a few choice items originally

acquired in France by his older brother for the family house in Beni Suef. At the turn of the century, my uncle had ordered several containers of Directoire and Louis XVI furnishings, which had arrived by sea together with huge gilded mirrors and the horses and carriages that he had been so fond of showing off.

For years I was led to believe that our furniture was nightmarish, because Maman seemed to hate it. I rather liked the light fittings though, with their square glass shapes that diffused a special yellowish light, unlike that of the Italian and French crystal chandeliers in other houses. It is only during the last two decades or so, when Art Deco was rediscovered in Egypt and became all the rage, that an upbeat reevaluation of our authentic pieces took place in the family discourse. Meanwhile, the negative first message must have hit my brother quite hard in his tender youth because as soon as he could move unencumbered by adults, he went around with a sharp pencil, intent on adding his personal touch to every wardrobe or armoire he could work on uninterrupted. A little later, his artistic tendencies allied themselves to a curious, industrious mind that inspired him to bore holes in the thick walls of his bedroom in order to spy on the occupants of the adjacent room – in this particular case, our grandmother.

On one occasion at least, he spread his decorator's talents beyond the precinct of our family abode and caused a real commotion. We had rented a villa in Alexandria for the summer. There was a salon full of knickknacks that we were not allowed to touch, but on the last day of the holidays, taking advantage of the fact that the adults were busy packing, Karim sneaked into the forbidden room and went to work on an adorable little French cabinet done up in antique white and gold. There was a rather important brouhaha when his handiwork was discovered. In those days, craftsmen were fortunately more readily available than they are today, and I distinctly remember an old man crouching in the salon, working hastily with a small can of paint and brushes while the landlords went from room to room upstairs checking the inventory. I had not been told about the damage or the last-minute repairs in case I decided to say something at the most inopportune moment, but my talents of detection had not failed me and I knew exactly what was going on. "It is a miracle that they did not smell the paint or notice the painter retreating to the balcony when he heard their voices," I told Maman to show her that she could not fool me. We left as soon as the craftsman had finished, and once we were on our way I added pointedly that I hoped no one would have the idea of leaning on the cabinet before the paint had dried completely. I never told them that I had seen my brother going into the salon with his deadly pencil and could therefore have averted the damage. They never punished him anyway.

Before my birth, and for a couple of years thereafter, my parents occupied the master bedroom of our house, a long and rather somber section spanning the length of the entire second floor, while my three stepsisters shared two communicating rooms on the opposite side of the hall, in the part of the house best exposed to the sun. The fourth room, being quite tiny, was used in turn by the chambermaid and the nanny, then as a small study for my father, and finally again briefly as a maid's room. When Papa died, Maman and my sister Farida, the only one of us who still lived at home at the time, transformed it into an informal dining room.

My parents' bedchamber was rather foreboding. It overlooked the properties at the back of our house and was never sunny. I rarely went there willingly. It had one balcony

from which the rambling villa of an old judge who lived alone could be glimpsed, poised amidst the eucalyptus trees of his vast garden. After dusk, distinct breathing could be heard coming from that direction. It did not sound quite human. I seriously believed that the judge transformed himself during the night into some sort of ogre and lay in wait in the foliage for his prey. It thrilled me to go onto the balcony with Maman, safely holding onto her hand, and listen to the rasping sound then quickly run to the safety of my own room, where the soft lampshades dispensed an aura of security and comfort. It took us years to discover that a huge bird nested in one of the trees, and snored ominously as it slept.

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Our garden was a magical place that I peopled with all sorts of creatures from fairies to fabulous families of insects, depending on the book I was reading at the time. Until I went to school, aged ten, the garden was enough to provide me with repeated moments of extreme delight. There was a majestic magnolia tree, reaching all the way up to the sky. When it flowered, our gardener climbed a very tall ladder while we children watched his progress attentively, dying, but not daring, to follow him. With his big garden scissors he would cut off a single white, heavily perfumed bloom, which we brought in a solemn procession to Maman, observing her as she placed it in a tall vase. I used to try to glimpse the inside of the flower but never gathered the courage to run my fingers around the powdery sheen of the delicate petals lest I ruin them. Somehow we felt that we had actively contributed to the operation and were proud of its successful completion. It was inconceivable that the cutting of the magnolia blossom could have taken place without our assistance.

Another favourite was the eucalyptus tree, at least as tall, but much sturdier than the magnolia, its papery silver leaves constantly rustling in the wind. It hosted several families of kites. Once, when Nenna was looking out of the window to make sure that our nanny was doing what she was paid to do, a kite rushed at her and, in a sweeping flight of wings, neatly snatched off the spectacles that she always wore low on her nose. We thought the incident hilarious, but she did not seem to agree. She claimed, quite rightly I suppose, that the bird could have injured her eyes.

My grandmother was a proud woman, and refused to be outwitted by a vulgar Egyptian kite. For days, she lay in wait on one of the balconies, armed with binoculars, observing the kites' nests, until one day, a ray of sun struck a particular spot where she thought she could see the shimmer of glass. The gardener was dispatched up the tree, an operation that was presented to him as dangerous but praiseworthy, and, at the risk of breaking his neck – a possibility mentioned in passing, just to free Nenna's conscience – he shinnied up the rough trunk. He jumped from one branch to the other while we cheered him on from the safety of the terrace, and eventually came down holding the precious object between his teeth. My grandmother received the gift without a word, rubbed the glasses with alcohol and replaced them on her nose. The same scenario could not be repeated, to our greatest disappointment, when another kite made off with an egg sandwich that it deftly snatched from my hand. We were simply told not to take food into the garden from then on. We did place pieces of bread on the grass, however, in the hope that these big birds, like the crows at the Gezira Sporting Club, would come close enough for us to make friends. I told my

brother and sister that I knew for a fact that they made perfect pets and could be trained to do magic. They could grow large enough to carry us on their backs if they wanted to, I added importantly. My siblings did not seem to believe me, but I assured them that I had read the information in a book. Since neither of them could read yet, they had no way of disproving my claim.

If we never succeeded in befriending the kites, there were other, less aloof garden creatures to occupy us. Anatole – a tame chameleon that did not seem to mind being handled and carried around – was one of them. There was also a number of frogs and lizards, my brother's exclusive province. He spent hours crouching in wait for them, then crawling after them to find their "houses". He managed to grab one fat lizard by the tail one day, and when it made its escape, leaving that body part between his grubby little fingers, my brother burst into tears, thinking that he had done irreparable damage to the little thing. For days, he woke up every morning asking: "Are you sure he is not hurting? How do you know his tail will grow back? Have you ever seen one grow back?"

When Karim was born, Father, overjoyed, but terrified of the evil eye, did not tell anyone, not even his own daughters, that the baby was a boy. To celebrate the happy event, however, he cut a fresh red rose and placed it in his buttonhole, then ordered the gardener to plant a mango tree. The tree grew slowly, and I often demanded of my brother that he stand next to the sapling so that I could see for myself who was growing faster. We were also keen to encourage Anatole to dwell in this particular tree. Mangoes were good for him, I informed my brother and sister, in my best rendition of Maman's voice. "They will put colour on his cheeks." The total absence of mangoes on the young branches, and the fact that Anatole's mouth extended from one ear to the other, obscuring any other feature and thwarting the formation of cheeks, did not seem to belie my pronouncements; nor did the fact that we were absolutely forbidden to eat the rich fruit, which (like many other succulent desserts), was believed to ruin children's – and consequently chameleons' – livers.

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The house and garden sufficed to fill my life for a long time. I had few friends my age. On one of my early birthdays, Maman, probably fearing criticism about her rather singular education methods, which involved keeping us as far away from normal people as possible, invited one little girl to share the cake (a light sponge smeared with home-made apricot jelly: an almost dietetic treat, since I was born in May, a hot month during which most foods, and especially chocolate, were liable to produce stomach upset). Eva arrived all dolled up in a white dress trimmed in red, red patent-leather shoes (a grown-up model, not the Mary Janes I always wore) and, slung across her shoulder, a small ladies' bag that immediately won my eternal admiration. It had never occurred to me that daughters could be dressed like reduced models of their mothers. I think I spent the whole hour staring at the object of my desire and completely forgot to play host. I wanted Eva to leave so that I could go to my room and imagine myself walking around with a similar bag.

My birthday presents paled completely in comparison to this wonder. For a while I entertained the thought of asking Maman for one, but the memory of a birthday party I had attended the previous year stopped me. Maman had bought a doll for the daughter

of one of her friends who had invited me to her tea party, and I was instructed to kiss the birthday girl, wish her all the best and give her the present as soon as I arrived. I did, and Lisette decided to open the box there and then. At first, I did not think much of the doll and reflected that the numerous ones I had at home were much prettier. I said nothing, however, because I already knew by then that such a remark could hurt Lisette's feelings. She, on the other hand, made such a fuss of the gift, showing it to her other guests and declaring that it was the nicest thing she had received that day, that I began coveting the doll or, more precisely, Lisette's joy. No present had ever made me so happy. I became fiercely jealous of what I imagined were her elated feelings at this moment. The doll's beauty was growing by the minute in my eyes. I suddenly decided that there was no way I would part with it. The scene that followed when Maman came to collect me has pride of place in family lore. Only when she promised to buy me the exact same doll did I let her drag me away. These incidents convinced me that I did not really need friends. The members of my family were exciting enough and all I asked for was that my life never changes.

UNSENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

Father had three daughters from a previous marriage to an Italian girl of menial origins, who eventually, faithful to her roots, abandoned him and their brood for the blue eyes of a Swiss waiter, 25 years her junior. I heard the story whispered for the first time when I was around six. The waiter had worked in Groppi, a most fashionable tearoom at the time – and even later – before he eloped with the blonde and giggly Laura, who had become bored with her husband's professional decorum and political aspirations, and preferred less exacting, more exciting, plebeian company. The couple had settled in Lugano, where Laura eventually lived to the ripe age of 96.

Papa, an eligible bachelor once more, remained one of Groppi's most faithful patrons: he was regularly seen at its weekly thés dansants, where he raised disapproving eyebrows for removing his tarboush before inviting the beautiful unattached ladies to join him in a riotous rumba.

The idea that it had all happened at Groppi's, where I had my best gastronomical treats, fired my imagination and I felt immense trepidation every time Maman took us there after the cinema to dine on smoked tongue sandwiches, one of Groppi's specialties. I would look around with delicious apprehension, observing the waiters. Would one of them suddenly leap on my mother and make away with her? I adored her, and would have hated to give her up, especially to one of the garçons. I found them much less impressive than Papa, who was tall and handsome and cut rather a formidable figure in his Délia suits, his full mustache and his burgundy tarboush.

My stepsisters occupied an important place in my life during my childhood. Not that I saw much of them; but, because they were the subject of frequent arguments between my parents and a seemingly endless topic of debate for Maman and Nenna, I paid a great deal of attention to their activities. The three young women seemed constantly in and out of marriages or liaisons, coming and going as they pleased, secure in the belief that they would always be welcome in their father's house.

Today, this generation of Egyptian women may appear rather odd: they had more, not less, freedom than their European counterparts, shedding their "Oriental" identity to adopt foreign languages, morals and clothes enthusiastically. In retrospect, I can only ascribe this lack of restrictions to the general climate of laissez-aller that influenced their class during the British occupation and then the Second World War. An atmosphere of turbulence must have been allowed to prevail, at least in part because the future had become so uncertain; the traditions inherited from ancestors who had known a more stable environment no longer providing adequate answers. "Freedom" captivated the educated segments of society, and they began questioning their own culture and way of life, which had proved so ineffectual in resisting foreign domination. While Europe, battered by the war faced deprivation, the privileged in our country enjoyed the milk and honey of our land.

I don't recall Father ever objecting to my sisters' most preposterous escapades, including trips abroad with men they were not wed to. He seems to have approved of ways that he had certainly not seen practiced in his native town of Upper Egypt. Carpe

diem, from all that transpired, was his attitude in adulthood. True, he had gone to Paris as a university student; but Maman, born and raised in Europe, was a terrible prude in comparison. A little younger than her stepdaughters and over twenty years younger than her husband, she had been brought up according to the strict principles of Catholicism (including the dictum that one should not, under any circumstance, relinquish one's virginity before a wedding band had been securely affixed to one's left ring-finger), and sternly disapproved of his daughters' conduct. Her principles were not very different from those of today's traditional Egyptian women – the only exception, as far as I can see, being her disapproval of female circumcision, which she deemed a barbaric practice. And of course, my modern Papa was of the same opinion. It is symptomatic of the changes that have occurred in Egypt in little more than a half-century that I only heard of female genital mutilation when it became the target of an eradication campaign in the early 1990s. Until then, I had believed it was a forgotten practice, somehow associated with sub-Saharan Africa. Many women of my generation and social milieu were as clueless in this respect as I was.

Maman did her best to bring to my father's attention the vast difference between her behaviour and that of his wayward daughters. How could he respect and trust them when they conducted themselves so sluttishly? Still imbued with her own mother's puritan teachings and the convent mentality, she waited in vain for divine punishment to strike them, providing her with her own personal proof that good always triumphed over evil. When I was born, she began to hint that the girls would end up spoiling my reputation as they had Papa's. Were they not the real cause of his repeated refusal to become a minister? How many times had he had to collect one of them from the police station? It had been bad enough for a member of parliament. A minister would not have survived the scandal. Maman knew for a fact, she said, that this was the real reason why he had given up his promising political career altogether. The girls had the loose morals of chattes en chaleur (taking after their mother in this respect); could he not see it, and force them at least to move out of the house, so as not to expose her own child to their nefarious influence? Maman obviously regarded permissiveness as a contagious disease.

At the same time, my stepsisters (probably enlightened by one of the servants, who repeated the newcomer's scathing criticism) had started to suspect that the new woman in the house was a harder nut to crack than they had thought at first, and decided to get rid of her. They were aided and abetted in this project by a Greek chambermaid alleged to be in love with Papa, as well as acquainted with magic. Sand was brought from the cemeteries and sprinkled in Maman's bed and in her feather-trimmed mules; incense was burned in secret and witchcraft performed in and around the house. The consequences of these activities, if any, remained unnoticeable. It was later rumoured that Eleni (the chambermaid) had spread the sand on the floor of the nuptial bedroom the wrong way (from the door to the bed instead of the other way around), and that this mistake had resulted in the rival becoming even more attached to the place.

Papa usually listened in silence to his young wife's recriminations and, when he had heard enough, locked himself in his room. She was never given any satisfaction in that realm. Consequently, she became convinced that he still loved Laura and accepted his daughters' shameful sexual exuberance only for this reason. Weren't Muslim girls supposed to live quietly at home until their father married them off? Instead, these three

dévergondées ran around with Jewish, Italian and Greek male and female friends, and did not even feel that it was beneath them to befriend British officers. One of them had even been married briefly to a Jew. Did Papa have no shame? Lacking the necessary humour, she did not see the irony in her situation: they, the daughters of a fallah who



My three step sisters and their mother (far right)

had climbed the social ladder quite recently, had been brought up in accordance with the foreign model – as seen through Egyptian eyes – while she, of pure European descent, had instinctively adopted the ideals they should have upheld. She considered my sisters' wantonness her cross to bear, as if marrying outside the foreign colony, where she really belonged, had not been enough. But what was an impoverished girl to do, when transplanted into a strange country? She had no dowry, apparently an indispensable perk even to the most stunning feminine physical features, if one wanted to marry within the expatriate circle. In these moments of self-pity, Maman almost forgot that she was, and had been from the start, very impressed with Papa's natural charm (his political position and financial prosperity were only powerful added attractions) and that she herself had used the lack of a dowry argument to force her mother into agreeing to a marriage of which, at first at least, she had strongly disapproved.

Maman's feelings of insecurity at having married a "tarbouchard" (fez wearer) showed in an unexpected detail, however: for a long time I believed that my father's first name was Chéri, because I had only heard Maman call him that, while he called her Elise. (We were warned never to tell strangers our mother's first name, a serious transgression in Islamic society). Having finally realised that he had a name other than "dear," "Papa," "your father," or simply "him" (when talking with Nenna), I asked Maman why she insisted on using all these substitutes: If the servants called him Mohamed Bey, I argued sensibly, then obviously his name was Mohamed. "Can you say Mohamed in French? How do you think it sounds?" she asked angrily, and I saw her flush slightly before she enjoined me to mind my own business. (Much later, when one of my own daughters married a young man also named Mohamed, my mother wanted to know how she was able to make love in Arabic. When the marriage ended, Maman was convinced this difficulty had been the main reason). She thought my father's first name sounded utterly ridiculous and not a little vulgar. It was obvious that she would have preferred marriage to someone called Ernest or Maximilien. I tried those names on my father, but they did not seem to fit; I tried many others, but somehow to me, Mohamed suited him best. As for Maman, she never allowed anyone to call her just Elise. She was Madame Kamel for the world and, as a special dispensation, Madame Elise for her stepdaughters. Although we told her later that Madame followed by a first name applied mainly to a dressmaker or a manicurist, she insisted that she needed to be shown respect as the mistress of the house. We suggested "Your Supremacy" but were scolded for our impertinence.

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Maman had come to Egypt with her financially bankrupt, widowed mother in the hope that they could live decently in a country known for its generosity toward a cosmopolitan, often impecunious elite, who benefited from diplomatic protection and the low cost of living.

It had all started in the late 1920s, with my grandmother meeting a handsome Egyptian prince in Bad Ragatz, a health resort in Switzerland, where they were both taking the waters. A romance developed and the prince extended a formal demand in marriage. He was not prepared to take a small daughter along, however, explaining that a fiancée with a child would not meet with his family's approval. Later, maybe... Little Elise was therefore momentarily stashed in a convent in Austria while my grandmother made preparations for her new life. Not a very trusting person by nature, she decided to make a quick trip to Egypt in order to inquire personally about the prince before committing herself. He could have been fake royalty, after all, or a fallen aristocrat looking for a rich catch. Not much was left of my grandmother's former opulence, but she always acted like a reigning queen. He could have been fooled by her ways into believing that she was in a position to replenish empty princely coffers.

In Cairo, she found out that the truth surpassed her wildest suspicions. Although her suitor was true-blue royalty, and not particularly impecunious, he was not only married with several children, but still kept a well stocked harem in which, she had no doubt now, he had intended to seclude her. Proud of her good sense, she decided to make the best of an unpleasant situation and spent some time visiting Egypt. She fell in love with Cairo, its tumultuous atmosphere and its blend of cultures. She decided that, prince or no prince, this was indeed the place for her. She went to retrieve my mother from her convent and they both sailed toward their new life.

On arrival, they took a room at the Continental Hotel, opposite the Ezbekiya Gardens. It seemed as chic as anything my grandmother had known in Paris, and much cheaper. She needed to manage her leftover money wisely. Well invested, it would allow them a comfortable life, at least for some years to come. Maman was 12 then.

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Maman and Papa in Switzerland

My grandmother had not been accustomed to planning ahead, or taking care of her own finances. This had been the job of her immensely rich, elderly husband before he died, on the eve of the war. She had been one of the most beautiful and affluent women in Europe, admired and fêted from Vienna to Carlsbad (now Karlovey Vary) and from Paris to Monte Carlo, where the couple had been habitués of the casinos.

Maman was born in Paris in 1913, and a few days before her first birthday her father was struck by a massive heart attack, leaving the baby to a young widow of 27 with a much depleted fortune, the bulk of which had already been abandoned in games of black-jack and roulette at the various elegant gambling spots they had frequented so assiduously. My grandmother had to cope with her newly bereaved state, and think of a way to survive the impending war while caring for an infant. As the Germans approached Paris, she joined a convoy evacuating foreigners toward Normandy. She boarded the wagon accompanied by her child, a nanny, and Maurice, a prize bulldog and the apple of her late husband's eye. The train was stopped halfway through and a French officer appeared in the compartment. He ordered my grandmother and her retinue to follow him. The officer gave her an envelope filled with banknotes and loaded the group into a carriage. "You will be going to Switzerland," he said, "but from there on, you are on your own. We will not be able help you." He would not say who "we" were, but she gathered that her husband's family in Austria had still been able to pull enough strings to save her.

The war years in Lausanne were bleak. First the nanny had to go, and shortly after, my grandmother gave Maurice away. Used to eating only red meat, the dog did not thrive on their daily diet of potatoes, meant to stretch the stash of money that Nenna had found in the envelope. To liven up the menu, she used to visit farms in the environs, hoping to purchase a bunch of radishes, fresh butter and milk or a few apples. One of the farmers took a liking to Maurice and offered to keep him. On the farm, he would

be fed better. For a long time, my grandmother made a daily trip to visit her dog, which soon began to thrive in his new surroundings.

Maman was not so lucky. Having noticed that her next-door neighbours seemed to enjoy more abundant supplies than she could obtain, Nenna arranged to pay them a fee in return for one meal a day for Elise. This way, she reasoned, the child would not go seriously hungry. Maman remembers that she was served gallons of watercress soup, but never offered a piece of the fruit pie that her hosts had for dessert on Sundays. Apparently this had not been included in the price.

Even so, the money eventually ran out as the war dragged on. My grandmother became a regular visitor to pawnbroker's shops, where she negotiated substantial loans for her diamonds. By pawning one to repay her debt on another, she managed to keep them all. As soon as the war was over, money from her husband's estate began to flow once more, allowing her not only to retrieve the last piece of jewellery, but also to resume, up to a point, her carefree life.

A few days after my grandmother's arrival in Cairo, as she was taking tea on the hotel terrace and revelling in what she thought of as the "Oriental hustle and bustle," a dashing Arab-looking young man spotted her. He approached her and addressed her in French; soon, they had struck up a friendship. In no time, he had taken charge of the widow and the orphan, and offered to manage their money. Since he had said that he was a banker, and sounded like one, she believed that he would act like one. That he disappeared with a large chunk of her savings soon after should have been expected. Apparently, it came as a surprise to the inexperienced woman who had trusted his large brown eyes and his lavish compliments.

From that day on, Nenna barred all Oriental gentlemen from her field of vision. She developed as little esteem for Arabs as she had entertained for European Jews. Whenever a particularly awful event was mentioned, she immediately inquired if the perpetrator was Muslim or Jewish. I suspect that she did not trust many Christians either, and certainly not the religiously inclined, having been exposed to a priest's obscene whispers when she was a child and vowed never again to go to confession.

Her bank account depleted, she found herself forced to move rather swiftly out of the Continental and into an apartment where she decided to rent one or two rooms to rich American couples. Such a scheme was not uncommon among foreigners in need of an additional income; downtown Cairo featured several exclusive pensions offering first-class accommodation to discerning travellers who found the hotels too touristy and vulgar. My grandmother spoke no Arabic and had no contact with the local population, but she managed to create a genteel world where she, as well as her guests, felt at home. The apartment was on Soliman Pasha Street, then one of Cairo's most sought-after addresses, and what remained of my grandmother's fortune went toward decorating it sumptuously. She acquired a number of precious Persian carpets and a few valuable pieces of furniture at bargain prices; these immediately gave an elegant continental aura to the majestically proportioned rooms. In no time, her pension became known to rich tourists who flocked to Egypt in winter, booking the precious rooms months in advance. In addition to pleasant surroundings, Nenna offered the best cuisine in town and some of her recipes travelled across the ocean, no doubt presented by stylish European and American hostesses as their own well-guarded family secrets.

It was this same apartment, first rented, when I was born, to Lady Lampson, the wife of the British High Commissioner (later Lord Killearn), then closed soon after Karim's birth (when Nenna moved in permanently with us), that Maman had saved (on the afternoon of my unfortunate incontinence) from the schemes of a greedy landowner: he had planned to rescind the contract on the grounds that the place had been vacant for a while and claimed that it had been requisitioned by a high-ranking British army officer.

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Of these first years in Cairo, Maman speaks little, but I gather that this was not a happy time. She was enrolled at the American Girls' School in Ghamra, where she was the youngest boarder and the only girl who did not go home to her family on weekends. She remembers spending long days when the school was deserted kneeling in church and praying for her mother, or playing hopscotch alone in the playground. Winter was the height of the touristic season and Nenna had no time to spare for her daughter. These otherwise particularly painful memories came in handy later, whenever we children complained about each other. Mother painted such a pathetic picture of her own loneliness when she was our age, deprived of the warmth of a brother or sister to confide in and share things with, that we always ended up encouraging each other's jibes, just to immerse ourselves in the joy of being together.

My grandmother was by far the most stimulating member of our family, although I did not pay her much attention at the time. I only saw her as the enforcer of Maman's rules and my rival for her affections. Only after her death, in 1965, did I become interested in her life before we knew her as our Nenna. As a child I had been curious, but had been eventually discouraged by the wall of silence that she built around the past.

Maman, always quite chatty when it came to my stepsisters' dark history, had frustratingly few details about her mother's, and to make up for the paucity of what she knew, or guessed at, was in the habit of emphasising instead her own miserable and lonely childhood, spent in luxury hotels and exclusive boarding schools. A small number of details surfaced from time to time, but these were few and far between. Maman remembered listening when she was little to descriptions of balls in Viennese palaces where my grandmother had been the centre of attention, rendering her aging husband inordinately jealous. Other accounts involved scenes where my grandfather bitterly reproached Nenna her frivolity and her appetite for male compliments. Her extraordinary beauty was a recurring theme. Her Venetian blond hair, her dark blue eyes, seemed to have driven every man she met crazy. She did not have a perfect body, however, and had to wear corsets that took hours to lace tightly enough to give her the waistline to which she aspired. She was a tease, according to my mother but "how could she have a real adventure with the armour she was wearing under her finery?" she often added. "Besides, she was far too vain to allow a man to see her embonpoint."

But life was not all corsets and Viennese waltzes; Nenna, it was hinted, had not been a stranger to life on a farm either. She proved it amply when we rented a house in Cyprus in the mountains and had to make do with the most primitive amenities. She knew how to light a fire in the old-fashioned stove, make yoghurt out of goat's milk and prepare delicious dishes with wild mushrooms. She was also able to milk a cow and slit a chicken's throat like the best of farmers. Maman assumed that she had spent her childhood in the country, although Nenna never confirmed



My step sisters and my brother-in-law (centre)

the information in so many words. Her stepfather had apparently thrashed her with a rope once when, aged 16, she had returned too late from a village dance; she had immediately decided to run away. Turning her back for ever on her family, including a sister whom she claimed she loved dearly, Nenna took off at the first opportunity and went to live in Vienna with a paternal aunt who was a celebrated hostess and held a regular literary salon. Nenna's beauty soon became the talk of the town. This is how she met her husband. His family did not favour the marriage, which led Maman to believe that Nenna had probably belonged to a different, less gilded, world. The couple had eloped and settled in an hôtel particulier in Paris. My grandmother never felt the need to talk about her family, with whom she had cut all ties and seemed to fear her in-laws, against whom she warned her daughter, without ever elaborating on the kind of danger she was in. This is all Maman thought she knew or had guessed at. Questioning her mother was no use. Nenna only spoke when she felt like it and said as much or as little as she wished – not a word more. She denied her daughter the right to share her past, which she considered hers alone, and refused to discuss any decision she had made on Elise's behalf.

Closed to her past, Nenna was however intensely interested in the present and particularly in political intrigues, whether these were unfolding in Egypt or abroad. She shunned any kind of social life, but from the shelter of our house, she knew the details of every palace scandal, including the king's, queen's and ministers' indiscretions and who exactly was sleeping with whom at any moment. No one ever knew how she obtained this information, from which she fashioned spine-tingling theories about the present and the future. She read *Le Progrès Egyptien* in the morning and *La Bourse Egyptienne* in the afternoon, cover to cover; these, supplemented every now and then with the biography of one of the members of a European royal family, all of whom she seemed to have known intimately, seemed to provide her with all the material she needed for her fantastic political forecasts.

When my brother and sister in turn began to ask questions about Nenna and why she and Maman always spoke German together, a sort of précis of my grandmother's life was concocted and presented to us children as the official version. Our maternal grandfather was a Hapsburg; his family had not approved of the marriage, because Nenna had been bad and run away from home (a disgraceful performance, never to be emulated if we knew what was good for us). They would have pardoned her wickedness if she had produced a boy (here my brother used to prance around proudly). As it was, my grandmother's first child had indeed been a boy, but he had not lived and, when my mother was born the following year, the family lost interest, especially since my grandfather died soon after. The war followed, and then the departure for Egypt. No one could fill in the blanks between these landmarks as no one in Egypt had known Nenna.

Other than expressing her political views about current events forcefully and passionately, Nenna never referred to herself, not even to the declining state of her health. When we began to see that she had trouble breathing, she simply denied it, pretending that we had a fertile imagination and wanted to make trouble as usual. Till the end, she remained a very private person.

Next to Nenna's sofa or bed (according to where she had decided to settle at the moment), stood one of the heavy wooden trunks that had accompanied her during her many travels around Europe. She never parted with it. Its top was always covered with bottles of pills and her heart medicine. The trunk was supposed to contain all her secrets and I obscurely understood that it would be a cardinal sin even to look at it too pointedly. When she died, Maman eventually opened it. She found old bills and the contract to an apartment her parents had rented for a summer in Florence in 1912. No letters, no photos, nothing that could enlighten us about a person who had lived some eighty years, part of which time must have been quite adventurous, if one believed my mother's impressions. Nenna went to her grave with her secrets – if she really had any – intact.

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Maman had in Nenna a knight in shining armour who took it upon her to defend her against us when we started becoming more independent. According to our grandmother's vision of things, we had not only decided to develop into less than attractive teenagers to be proud of and show off to friends, but we seemed engaged in doing our utmost to make her poor Elise suffer more than she had already. Maman, of course did not see fit to take on our defence.

Nenna did not believe in respecting our budding sense of privacy. She seemed to think that there was something basically wrong with us because we were our father's children. She felt she had to watch us to catch our wicked tendencies and eradicate them before they started to grow. In particular, she suspected that we were genetically dishonest and sneaky. As we grew into adolescence, she decided that she would no longer remain "locked up" in her bedroom. Instead, she settled herself permanently on a sofa in the hall, facing the front door, where she was sure to miss none of the household's action. Clearly, she did not mind stooping from international diplomacy to the observation of local events. She had the makings of a first-rate FBI agent and followed our conversations closely while pretending to be engrossed in her newspaper. She even began to claim that she was hard of hearing when she noticed that we were

whispering in her presence, forcing her to connect the dots of our imperfectly perceptible exchanges. She kept us children under constant surveillance, sometimes accusing us of the most outrageous misdeeds. On one occasion, while she sat reading as usual, my brother, then ten or eleven, began teasing our dog. They wrestled and rolled about on the floor. Suddenly, she ordered him to get up and leave the animal alone. "I saw what you were doing," she said sternly; then, after a slight pause, during which she attempted to retrieve the seldom-used French word, she added: "You were mastirating the dog!"

Another time, she accused me of having opened the cage in which she was keeping an injured bird on the terrace. The fact that I had been asleep in my room while she sat with the cage at her feet was no proof, according to her, of my innocence. Since we never found out what had happened to the bird, and since she was so persuasive, I began to believe that I had let the bird out without knowing. For a while I fancied myself as a sleepwalker. That should add an interesting dimension to my relationship with the family, I thought. The possibilities were endless. I would become a very special person, needing to be handled with utmost care. I could make unreasonable demands followed by irrational scenes if denied and everyone would be forced to comply because of my problem. I hinted at nightly promenades across the façade of the house, but unfortunately, I was never observed taking a walk on the balcony railing, or even ambling towards the kitchen with my eyes closed to reach for the chicken leg left over from dinner. I had to resort to vulgar periodic asthma attacks to hold my audience's attention.

Without even looking up, Nenna could gauge Maman's moods correctly, guess if she had just had an argument with my father, or if she had lost money on the stock exchange that day. My grandmother had encouraged Elise to invest the household and pocket money she received from Father in stocks and bonds, and had even contributed the initial capital herself. She was very proud the day Maman bought a villa in Alexandria with the proceeds of her clever operations, executed without ever depriving us in the least, and – most crucially, perhaps – without my father's knowledge. The rest of the family begged to differ, but did so in silence. My brother in particular was of the opinion that most of the pocket money owed him had been invested in the project and claimed that he was a shareholder in the villa. "This is our real home," Nenna told Maman when she saw the house for the first time. She loved it to her dying day and insisted on staying there the summer she felt – rightly – that she might be dying.

By the time I was twelve, it was accepted that Nenna had a heart condition and her doctors had recommended a quiet life. We were specifically told not to upset or overexcite her with our squabbles, but I am afraid we were not always very successful in heeding these instructions. Nor did we try very hard. I can recall specific occasions when I caught her snooping through my "private" papers and was downright mean to her. She had the knack of bringing out the worst in me. Long after she died, I began to think that maybe it was because she always saw through me so well.

O MOTHER

During my entire infancy, Maman shone like a beacon in my life. She was the embodiment of everything good and just. I worshipped her and wanted to be near her constantly. I never questioned the legitimacy of her demands on us. I believed that God had created the Word and then put my mother in charge of disseminating it. It was posited from the beginning that she was perfect and owned a set of infallible scales on which she measured our faults. If she herself had shortcomings, these were merely the consequences of an excess of qualities. Hence my unquestioning acceptance of her covert and overt criticism, and its everlasting and devastating effects on my character. I could only perceive myself through her eyes and, since she often stated that she saw people as they were and not as they wished to be seen, it made perfect sense for me to adopt her point of view automatically, admiring those who gained her approval and despising those who failed the test. Her own family did not escape her sting; she was always ready to tell us where and how we had erred, although she remained fiercely loyal to us in the presence of strangers and supported us wholeheartedly in times of trauma.

Maman always enjoyed seeing herself as a victim, playing the part to perfection when anyone differed with her. I don't think she really believed it, but found it a convenient ploy to rally us around her. Our actions directly reflected on her, she said and she believed it, to her last day: By being delinquent in any way, she argued, we told the world that she did not bring us up properly. In fact, this fixation has always had to do with wanting us to be incontrovertibly better than our stepsisters, our triumphs, professional and otherwise, proving beyond discussion according to her, that she was infinitely superior to Laura. Since we never intentionally wanted to hurt her, this premise only burdened us with a vague sense of culpability following the most innocent pranks, and a constant need to apologise and make promises of atonement for often imaginary slights. The assumption that our intentions were not always pure was the crux of all her accounts of past or present occurrences, and she could be so persuasive that far into adulthood we subscribed uncritically to her version of our lives, even though we knew from firsthand experience that the facts were otherwise. Meanwhile, she always compelled us to bend to her iron will or incur her disapproval, transforming our legitimate resistance into serious offences that she would remember forever, she assured us. Thus were our mistakes compounded, as one black mark followed another in her ledger, providing her with ready fuel for the next confrontation.

For a long time, I was convinced that I was responsible for the lack of complete harmony I had began to notice between my mother and father: He had not liked me, she had made up for it. In time, it dawned on me that Maman had not so much yielded to my spoiled child's tricks as settled scores – with Nenna, who had so often abandoned her for more worldly pursuits, and with Papa of course, who had proved to be less than the perfect husband she had expected, constantly in awe of her beauty and youth.

Maman seemed to think that, alone with a small child, Nenna had been guilty of grabbing at whatever diversions came her way. Understandably, an infant had represented a major impediment to the young woman's love for life and my mother had often been

disposed of to suit Nenna's plans rather than her own well-being. Hence, her giving in to my shenanigans showed my grandmother the way a good parent should act. As for my father, if he had daughters that took precedence over her, she had three children also (a superior threesome since it included a boy) who were worthier of attention than he was.

Maman's memories of her childhood were sad, or at least permeated with self-pity. She had expected that later in life she would get compensation for the lack of happiness she had experienced. She had missed her father in a poignant way, beyond the understanding of anyone who has not suffered her condition; even those who have might have deemed exaggerated her romantic attachment to a man she had not had a chance to know and certainly could not remember, and on whom she bestowed the imaginary power of righting all wrongs. She vividly recalled the pain of being deprived of a father and abandoned by a frivolous mother in expensive hotel rooms for the day, or boarding schools for the year. During Nenna's lifetime she spoke little with her about these particular memories and, on the rare occasions when she did, I could feel the tension between the two women. Nenna automatically contradicted her about the facts or the places, but refused to discuss the reasons why things had happened the way they had. Despite the differences of interpretation, Maman always said that the day she lost her mother, she also lost her only connection to her past and her true identity. If she had any relatives still alive anywhere in the world, she did not know about them. During her years in Egypt my grandmother had cut all ties with her family and Maman never found out if, unbeknownst to her, there had been a major row (Nenna was known to ban people from her life forever when they offended her in the least) or if they had all just died. After my grandmother's death, there was no one left to answer her questions, nor consolation extended by her ageing husband who had taken to pointing out her foreignness and her lack of understanding of Egyptian ways.

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Birthdays were one field in which my mother had great freedom to play and win points over my father. Very early on we were schooled in the right ways of welcoming a very special day, alleged equal to no other in the life of any human. We received presents and were fussed over all day long. As we grew up, we were inspired to return the favour to the adults immediately surrounding us as well as to each other.

I recall one particular day when I went to school in the morning completely oblivious of Maman's birthday. I had not wished her many happy returns; worse, I had not offered the necessary obeisance to extract a few pounds from my father with which I could buy her a present. All along, we had been nurtured with examples of children who performed almost miraculous feats to save enough for their mother's birthday gift, expressing thus in a concrete way the love they had for her. Realising my terrible oversight, I burst into tears in the middle of the lesson. Nonplussed, the teacher allowed me to sit outside until I calmed down. After class, she inquired about my untoward display of sorrow. I told her between sobs. "So what?" she asked, rather puzzled at such bizarre behaviour. "You can give her a big kiss when you go home and tell her that you are sorry. Forgetting is no crime." Little did she know that in my family it was, and that I was not about to see the end of my slip.

My mother was waiting for me after school as usual. "You must have a great deal on your mind," she told me with false concern. "I know," I blurted. "I forgot to wish you happy birthday. I am truly sorry." I wanted the words out and done with. "Oh, you think it is so simple?" she asked with heavy irony. "You hurt my feelings then ask for forgiveness, and that's it?" I knew she expected some brilliant suggestion but I was not yet completely aware of the way her mind worked. "Forget my birthday when it comes," I said lamely. It was unfair. I did not give a damn about my own birthday and would have much preferred it going by unrecorded and unmentioned, whereas she cared immensely. "Of course, you did not think of buying me the tiniest of presents," she said after a while. "I could take that from your brother and sister; they are still too young, but you?" She sounded sincerely pained. "I have no money," I mumbled. "Give me the money you are saving from my last birthday and I will buy you a giant present." Father always gave us money for birthdays and mother took it away for safekeeping as soon as it was handed to us. "Not good enough. Your money is at the bank and there is a much easier way to lay your hand on some, but you were just too lazy to think."

Of course I had known from the start that I had been expected to ask Papa for the amount and go through the little performance that I dreaded, during which he explained to me for the umpteen time that birthdays were not such sacred occasions and were mounted into circus productions by Maman only because she needed extra excitement and a reason to be unhappy and resentful at the end of the day. "At first, I used to buy her a small gift or bring her flowers, but she was not satisfied. She would have preferred gold and diamonds to mark the day of her birth. In my village they celebrate the birth of holy sheikhs with much fanfare. I have been toying with the idea of organising a special Mulid for a live saint this time: Sainte Elise," he told me on this occasion. Still, he did not hand over the cash, and I had to wait until he exhausted his pleasantries. I knew that as soon as I received any amount from him, I had to look properly stricken and whisper "is that all?" to induce him to give me some more. Usually I skipped the last act, but on this particular occasion I guessed that I was expected to surpass myself.

A few years ago I was telling my mother about my plans for summer. She looked up, suddenly attentive. "You are going to miss your sister's birthday," she said, shock registering on her face. I was expecting her reaction and was more or less ready to defend myself, albeit sheepishly. Old habits die hard. "You know," my daughter told her, before I began to babble, "people don't fuss so much about an anniversary. The important thing is that we love each other." Maman had reflected for a minute. "Maybe you are right," she finally admitted. "When I was a child, I never had birthdays. My mother forgot them consistently so I decided that I would make them a real celebration as soon as I could, to make up for the sadness I had experienced as a child. If your mother does not want to uphold the tradition, I can no longer force her. I am losing interest in life anyway." She didn't at the time, and we made it a point to celebrate any occasion she cared for till the end of her life.

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If Maman and Nenna's relationship had remained so close, it was also due to the fact that very early on in the marriage, Father was assumed to be guilty of mental cruelty: he had never made any allowance for her youth and sensitivity; on the contrary he seemed to imply that they were handicaps. He had fully expected her to be a mother to his children, though

they were her contemporaries. Only the youngest one, barely nine at the time of my father's remarriage, could have been entitled to some mothering. Maman did look after her, but did so grudgingly, thinking that Father should have been much more contemptuous of Laura for leaving her behind. Since he wasn't, she felt resentment at having to replace his vagrant wife, performing duties that she disliked.

My stepsisters, on the other hand, did little to make my mother feel welcome in her new surroundings. Men have mistresses who excite their wives' jealousy; Father had his daughters, who, he said self-righteously, were his blood relations and blood was thicker than water, as everyone knew. My sisters made sure that my mother was given plenty of opportunities to observe their closeness to him. Nenna however was vigilant: if he was ganging up with his daughters, she would protect my mother against them and she was a force to be reckoned with.

A story repeated to us several times is indicative of the atmosphere that reigned in our strange household: during one of Maman's pregnancies, Nenna used to buy steak every day and have it grilled for lunch. As soon as the meat came to the table, Maman passed the plate around. For some reason that I could never understand, it was returned to her empty every time. At first I was bewildered by the story, but could not put into words the absurdity of the facts as they were presented. There was a missing link. Finally I asked one day how many steaks were served. "One of course," was Maman's answer, "Nenna did not like red meat." When I asked why they did not buy more, since obviously there were takers, my mother seemed surprised. "Nenna was not going to buy steak for your father and his daughters," she said rather indignantly, although she did not explain further. "Who ate your steak, then?" I wanted to know. "Your father," said my mother promptly. "Well, you could have ordered the cook to buy steak for all of you, or at least for him, since he liked it so much." Maman thought for a while: "Steak was a European thing, only appreciated by my mother and me," she finally argued rather defensively. "Your father was Egyptian and ate stews."

There was a more elaborate explanation behind such incredible pronouncement. In most Egyptian households, it is the housewife who composes the following day's menu, whether she cooks it herself or entrusts the job to a cook. When my mother married, my older sister, who had replaced Laura in running the house, hang on to this particular duty to the newcomer's great displeasure. Then my sister left on one of her frequent forays into the wide world, and Maman was finally assigned the task. Quite soon, Father began complaining about the food bills. On one occasion, he even mentioned that his own sister had been able to feed a family of eight with a fraction of the sum needed by my mother. "And what did she cook?" she had asked. "Lots of delicious stews," had been his answer. This is why she had made it a point to serve stew every day, although she did not enjoy the dish. The lonely steak was a form of protest and made two points: one, no one except her mother had noticed that in her condition she needed special fare; two, on her restricted budget, the family could not afford prime meat, inducing my grandmother to buy steak for her daughter with her own money, as a specially prescribed food. I suspect that Father ate the steak just to spite the two women, because I never saw him requesting or eating red meat, either at home or in a restaurant. Maman had not lied when she stated that he liked stews best.

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Only when my brother and sister were born, and Nenna had moved in permanently to help with the three growing children, did Father begin to think that the house could no longer accommodate so many people as well as the large number of servants we needed. True, my sisters were not permanent dwellers, but they could be counted on to arrive in the middle of the night after a quarrel with their current boyfriend or husband and want their room at once. At this point, he decided to build an extra floor for his daughters. Their new apartment had a private entrance and, with more space, they often had friends (men and women) over to spend the night. They were also much more often at home, and this pleased my father, who spent many evenings upstairs. From my bedroom, I could hear the sound of stiletto heels above my head, and when I could not sleep, I often stared at the ceiling, wondering what could be going on that required so much stomping.

The way I saw it, my sisters lived an exceedingly interesting life and their friends, of whom I had but brief glimpses as they came and went, were the most gorgeous people I had ever laid eyes on. They were all very stylish and smelled beautifully. In summer the women wore necklaces and bracelets of fragrant jasmine over their jewellery and skimpy, low-cut dresses that showed their legs and many other parts of the body. In winter, they were covered in fur. The men often wore tarboushes in the evening and sometimes jaunty caps in the afternoon, when they drove their convertibles. They also came in large chauffeured cars in many different and vivid colours, far superior to our own LaSalle, which was of a hue that can only be properly described as poo green. Their cars were objects of marvel, because they were the only concrete manifestation of their presence that I could examine at leisure, their occupants having disappeared in a flurry of fineries up the stairs and into my sisters' den. Most often however, they arrived as we were departing for our afternoon excursion to the gardens and Mother rushed us into the car, fearful that we should get an eyeful of dissolute living.

Apart from its unfortunate colour, our LaSalle had some nifty features, like a gilded telephone my mother used to give instructions to our driver and two folding seats on which we were allowed to sit when there were more than one grownup riding with us. We used it every day to drive around, until the chauffeur once caught my fingers in the door while shutting it. I screamed so loudly that my brother, then still a toddler, refused go near the car for months and I was made to walk from then on to the nearby Orman Gardens, while Karim was pushed in a perambulator.

I hated the Orman Gardens with a passion. When my mother was pregnant and needed to lie down frequently, I had been dispatched on my daily outings with my grandmother and the nanny. I found the big trees in the Orman awfully sad and quite scary, all the more so because young men used to hide behind them. To detract my attention from their surreptitious activities, my grandmother and the nanny would crouch behind bushes and howl like ghosts. I was expected to look for them, but instead, I just stood there, watching the strange spectacle offered by the sexually frustrated youth and was overcome with such distress that I could not even begin to cry. I abhorred the game and wanted them to stop but they seemed to be having so much fun that I could not tell them how awful it made me feel.

Another favourite joke of my grandmother's was to dismiss the driver so that we could walk home. It was really a short distance, but she took me on different routes, claiming all the time that she had forgotten the right way and that we were lost and

would never again be able to find the house. I was absolutely petrified, a state that seemed to increase her gaiety many times over. Once my brother was born, my mother took over, but the Orman garden remained one place where I was not happy to go.



Feeling lost and scared

On the other hand, I had also disliked the Fish Gardens, a frequent destination before my mother's pregnancy. My main gripe was that there, she met her friend Vera Bajocchi and the two women never stopped talking. Madame Bajocchi had two daughters, Anna and Monica, who were a little older than me, but old enough not to pay me any attention. The girls sat at their mother's side, constantly interrupting her and going as far as to pull her chin toward them to force her to look their way. I knew for a fact that this was absolutely forbidden, and no matter how much I wished I could copy them, I never dared. Instead, I eavesdropped on the conversation, which seemed centred on the sayings and actions of a gentleman they called Henri Curiel. Madame Bajocchi admired him, while my mother thought that he looked scrawny and bedraggled as well as ridiculous in his shorts and sandals. She seemed to make fun of Madame Bajocchi for even listening to him. One day I heard my mother comment that he was a dangerous young man. Well, I thought, he could not be as dangerous as Arnoldino, the little boy I had a crush on, and who had pushed me down the slope of the hillock while my mother was busy talking; or my friend Patsy who had forced me to jump into the irrigation well of the garden's greenhouse as a necessary condition to remaining her friend. At least that little accident had forced my mother to interrupt her conversation in a hurry. Patsy was the Cullas' daughter and her father was the Polish ambassador to Egypt. My mother and Patsy's were friends and, when her father was ousted from his post in 1942, Maman had offered to take care of their little girl while they packed. Patsy hated this arrangement and took it out on me, but after I almost drowned, we stopped going to the Fish Gardens. Instead we went to visit the Cullas at the Franciscan School in Zamalek, where mother and daughter had taken refuge until their fate was decided. Madame Culla kept saying that they would be forced to go to Australia, where she would have no choice but to seek employment as a chambermaid. I did not believe her. She was such an elegant lady with big blue eyes and a perfect complexion, whereas the chambermaids that came and went in our house were all extremely unattractive. Patsy was equally beautiful and when I thought that she had been forced to leave her house and all her toys, I felt exceedingly sorry for her. For this reason I forgave her my unpleasant dunk in dirty water.

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No matter what happened in the garden or at any other place I was taken, admittedly for my amusement, I was always more interested in returning home, hoping to glimpse my stepsisters

and their friends on their way out. Patsy and company were ordinary people with quite uninteresting activities. My stepsisters lives were made of the stuff of fairy tales.

I was rarely allowed to visit them in their upstairs retreat however, because my mother believed the liberties they took in conversation might disturb my innocent thoughts; but on some days, when they expressly asked her to let me come, my nanny took me up the steep steps to their new, fragrant nest for a few minutes. Maman feared that if she refused to let me go, my father would find out and accuse her of being unfriendly to his daughters. For him they were perfect and would only exert a salutary influence on the spoiled brat that I was. To this day, I am still surprised that he pretended not to know of male visitors – especially after Nenna lay in wait for one of them on the stairs and drenched him with a bucket of icy water as he was making his getaway. I don't recall the incident having had any repercussions, and my sisters must have kept it quiet to avoid drawing attention to their visitor's gender.

Having been warned repeatedly not to eat or drink anything when I was "up there" (Maman harboured the strange notion that her stepdaughters were out to poison not only her children's minds but their bodies as well), I was finally allowed to go. I walked on a cloud towards a magic land. While there, I observed everything they did and said to dream about it later pretending to myself that I was one of them.

My half-sisters' chatter pointedly made it clear that having a mother presented definite disadvantages. For instance, they told me, as I watched them getting ready for a party, I would never be able to wear makeup as long as I lived with my mother. I was often amazed at the miraculous effects they produced with their pencils and brushes. The first time I witnessed the transformation, I knew I needed to do the same. I spent much time trying to resolve this dilemma: was keeping my mother worth renouncing the magical ministrations that could change me into a different, gorgeous person, or would I be better off with her around to protect me? Were my sisters devious and using me to get rid of Maman? Did they want her to go away like Laura? Were they hoping that she would simply disappear and die so that they could have their father to themselves? And what would happen to me? I could not share my doubts with anyone, but returned from my visits so overexcited that I often developed a fever soon after.

For a while, I cried myself to sleep, imagining Maman's death. Would I be dressed in black for the funeral? Would they put her in a coffin? What would they do with her long hair? Would they put her in a hole and throw earth on her, as they did with other dead people? From my readings, I had grasped that this was the normal procedure, but I wasn't really sure what being dead entailed. I whispered the words "dead", "coffin", "funeral" into my pillow until tears welled in my eyes; but I was crying over the poor orphan that I would become rather than over my mother's demise, in which I did not really believe. I could only imagine her briskly ordering me to eat my porridge, get dressed or go to my room. Maman could only be a living person; neither disease nor death fit the picture I had of her. Finally I made up a new version where she would simply abandon us for nicer children who did not wonder about life without her. That way, I felt less guilt at secretly thinking about her disappearance, but could still star in the saga that followed her departure. It was clear to me that after a while she would come back, disappointed by the other children, and feel sorry that she had been wicked enough to leave us to Nenna. By this time, of course, I would be applying make-up every day; she would exclaim that I was beautiful, and had been perfectly right to copy my sisters.

FOOD, BEAUTIFUL FOOD

I eventually stopped torturing myself with alternative lives, especially since I could never detect anything suspicious going on between my mother and anyone she happened to meet. Early on, I had discounted the waiters at Groppi, whose behaviour seemed totally above board. If one of them had taken Laura away from her daughters, they did not seem to want the same from my mother. They were all unobtrusively polite to her and she addressed them in the haughty manner befitting the wife of someone in high places.

Besides, as I graduated from smoked tongue to petits fours and chocolate mousse, the visits to Groppi acquired an entirely different connotation, leading me down a far more pleasurable path. As I discovered a new world of delicacies, my increasingly sophisticated sense of taste began to dominate my life. Between the ages of six and 16, it seemed to engulf all my other senses – and certainly smothered the guilty thoughts I had about leading a life free of maternal supervision. Food was my main – perhaps my only – preoccupation. This unusual greediness may have been the result of the almost fascist health regimen to which we children were subjected; the grownups, on the other hand, suffered no restrictions. Sneaking into the dining room while the servants set out the steaming dishes (my father did not want them milling about during the meal), I would hide under the table and await a lull in their activity. As soon as they had returned to the kitchen, I would cram my mouth with as many morsels of food as I could swallow quickly. Stuffed vegetables and the meat in stews were my favourites because I could rearrange the plate in such a way that no one would notice the missing items. No food has ever tasted even remotely as good.

Many events of my childhood lie at the bottom of my memory, some completely forgotten, others barely or imperfectly remembered; but whenever I go back in time, the one thing I am sure to retrieve vividly is the taste of the various gastronomic delights for which I lived, and the circumstances linked to their consumption. While my body and mind were growing at an ordinary pace — displaying ordinary qualities — my stomach was developing poetic aptitudes, thwarted only by the stern warnings of Dr Bossi, our Swiss pediatrician.

Dr Bossi appeared in my life when I was about three. He exited when I was in my late twenties having even briefly given me advice when one of my daughters was a baby. He had white hair and smelled of what I came to recognise as rather cheap lavender cologne. He wore blue shirts with hard, detachable white celluloid collars. He was not only our doctor; he was also my parents' friend. My mother was so terrified that she might need him one day and not find him that she invited him and his wife out constantly. They met at the Gezira Club, at Groppi or, less frequently, in restaurants. My mother invariably picked up the bill. When my sister was born, the number of invitations increased. With three children, one was always bound to be sick. At Christmas and Easter, the boxes of chocolates sent to the Bossis with my parents' best wishes were vastly larger than those delivered to our teachers and the other medical practitioners who had attended us during the year.

Seeing Maman turn the charm on whenever Dr Bossi had to be consulted led me to muse about the possibilities of her running away with him. Would he leave his own

wife to Papa? I detested Mrs Doctor, as she liked to be called. She was a whimpering, middle-aged former beauty, probably a dancer of vaguely Hungarian origin, whom her husband's clients courted assiduously on the assumption that she always knew the doctor's whereabouts.

In fact, she rarely did. On a particularly hot summer day, my brother, then less than six months old developed a high fever accompanied by convulsions. My parents panicked, and while Maman begged Mrs Doctor on the telephone to look for her husband, Papa went in search of him. He found him having tea in Groppi and explained the emergency. "Go home, put him in a cold bath," the doctor told him, "I am right behind you." When he arrived, three hours later, the little boy was resting comfortably and his temperature had vanished. The doctor stayed on late into the night, chatting with my parents, dunking Petits Beurres into his tea and explaining that he had not hurried because he knew that the baby was in no serious danger. Unconvinced, my parents nodded obediently, terrified that if they contradicted him he would abandon them. I now felt entitled to hate both the doctor and his wife, and for once agreed with Nenna, who called Dr Bossi an "awful man" behind his back.

When I heard the expression petite bourgeoise for the first time at school, it immediately conjured up the image of the doctor's wife. Unlike Maman, her friend Irene and my stepsisters, whom I instinctively knew had class, Madame Bossi raised her little finger high when she picked up her teacup and pursed her lips, sucking on her teeth in a peculiarly vulgar way if she disapproved of someone, which was often. I had overheard Maman and Nenna discussing her and had learned that she had been a dancer of great beauty in one of Cairo's most famous cabarets before she married Dr B. In those days, many second-rate Hungarian performers were trying to make it in far-away countries. Egypt and Cuba were favourite haunts. Their efforts were generally aimed at finding a rich protector or, even better, a rich husband.

To reach the pinnacle was to attract the king's attention, although even in those days, it was already no secret (among Egyptians, at least) that he was stingy and rarely parted with anything of consequence to reward his mistresses for their compliance – and, more importantly, their silence regarding his poorly developed masculine attributes. Everyone knew that his attention span was extremely short, as was his prowess; and women with the propensity to hang about after it was over were swiftly sent packing. It was also murmured that those who did not get the message fast enough or were bent on causing trouble sometimes met with mysterious and untimely accidents.

Far safer was the choice of a wealthy pasha, not too close to the seat of power, but not too remote either, who was willing and able to keep the lady of his choice in style. Those who nabbed such a prize were prone to delusions of grandeur and snubbed their Egyptian counterparts. They were usually keen to hide the circumstances of their arrival in Egypt, and claimed that they were Russian princesses who had fled before the communists.

I knew of at least one pasha who had married a performer, but she was more splendid than Mrs Doctor. She had two beautiful teenaged daughters, and their arrival at the Gezira Club's Lido turned heads and invariably gave rise to much whispering in the gentlemen's corner, as well as envious and hostile glances from the ladies'. Scandals were rife; even I managed to eavesdrop on several.

One of my favourites starred Papa. A friend of his had fallen in love with a French artiste, who after a while saw her visa revoked, no doubt courtesy of the man's wife, who was well connected. Incensed, he called my father for legal advice. Papa told him to get his girlfriend to the hospital at once, under the pretext that she was suffering from acute appendicitis. Not long after the lady had been settled between the sheets, Father arrived with a ma'zoun (the government official who performs marriages). The friend and his paramour were married, while the doctor in attendance and Papa acted as witnesses. The French beauty, now legally married, was never asked again to leave Egypt and used to strut through the Gezira Club casting contemptuous glances about her.

Doctor Bossi and his wife had no children, which — I always suspected — was why he so badly lacked a bedside manner with his young patients. He specialised in pinching cheeks hard and prescribing the foulest diets he could dream up. He wrote down his disgusting menus for mothers to follow to the letter. When I was four, I had not yet explored the various quirks that sadism toward children can take, but I knew that there was something fundamentally wrong with Dr Bossi. Why else would he have wanted anyone to eat yoghurt topped with stewed prunes? Why should breakfast consist of warm fava beans with lemon but no oil, on dry toast? Why was I forced to eat white rice, boiled courgettes and a single grilled lamb chop for lunch every single day of my life? My mother prided herself on following Dr B's orders scrupulously and delighted in recounting the story of a woman she knew, who had fallen in love with her son's pediatrician. When she found out that her son's frequent indispositions were caused by an allergy to spinach, she fed him the vegetable almost every day so that she could have an excuse for visiting the object of her desire.

Until I was around ten, we ate our meals before my parents had theirs. The smell of their food tickled my nostrils as Mary, my Greek governess, shovelled tasteless lumps of boiled rice forcefully into my mouth. Spitting was out of the question. Some unspoken rule prevented us from doing so. I just pushed the grains of rice around with my tongue, trying to discover some hidden property that made them so good for me. Sadly, I never could credit them with any saving grace. As a grownup, I never ate rice if I could help it.

Later, when the rules had been relaxed somewhat and more palatable items added to the menu, including such delicacies as boiled chicken breasts, green peas and baby carrots, I brought a book to table, selecting tales for which the French were then famous, and in which the author invariably revelled in the description of destitute, orphaned or terminally ill children. Being able to eat at all was a luxury, I told myself. In one particular story, the little boy had only a piece of dry bread for his lunch. He ate it beside the basement window of a large restaurant's kitchen, where meat and poultry were being roasted in immense ovens. The odour served as an accompaniment to his bread and made it tasty. This passage stuck in my memory: after all, I was doing the same, enhancing my diet with the smell of what my parents were about to eat.

At around this time, I began to crave meat more than any other food. Early in the morning I would begin to pester Maman, demanding to know what we would be having for lunch. She often teased me, telling me that no meat would be served. One day, as she kept insisting that I would have only rice and carrots, I became quite tearful at the thought that I might actually be deprived of my favourite fare. "Here," she said, extending her perfectly rounded arm; "if you want meat so much, take a bite." I looked at the milky white expanse of flesh

and wondered if it would have the bland pleasantness of chicken breasts – my second favourite permissible treat. I did not bite her, but I cannot swear that I did not contemplate doing it, just to see how her arm would taste.

The period of deprivation came to an abrupt end the day my grandmother began to rule over the kitchen. When the house was remodelled to accommodate an extra floor, the servants' stairs were removed on our level and a small room was created off the large corridor, where previously there had been only a landing. An oven, a refrigerator and a couple of tables were fitted into this kitchenette, which had been used before just to make coffee or reheat my father's evening meal. At first, a cook (not always the same: my parents were very demanding) came upstairs to perform these duties, but when one of them chased my grandmother out of the kitchen with a cleaver for criticising his methods, the space was turned over to her and she made it into her exclusive domain, occasionally baking us cakes and biscuits in the afternoon or preparing her special lentil soup for an early lunch on Sundays, if we were going to a three o'clock movie downtown. The lentil soup was her well-guarded secret, and I have never eaten anything like it anywhere. It was delicious and repulsive at the same time. The brown puree had a tendency to coagulate when cooling and the first contact with the tongue sent shivers of disgust rippling down the back of my neck, but after a couple of spoonfuls the taste seemed to grow on me and by the time I had finished my plate I was ready for more. The recipe featured dark lentils cooked for a long time in a broth made of meat, marrowbones and all the vegetables in season. When the concoction was ready, the meat and bones were removed and the contents of the pot put through a strainer. Salt and pepper were then added. I once tried this soup on my daughters, but their overwhelmingly negative reaction completely discouraged me. That it was supposed to be good for you made it even more ghastly, they said.

Nenna had more than culinary talent: she had genius, and a will of her own. She gently dissolved her dislike of Dr Bossi in preparations where all the prohibited ingredients reigned supreme. Her wiener schnitzels were unequalled: juicy slabs of veal, thinly covered in the white crumbs of homemade bread and fried slowly in butter, not oil. Chicken breasts were prepared the same way, usually accompanied by potatoes that were boiled then roughly mashed in a lot of fresh butter and left to cook until a golden crust formed at the bottom of the pan. She made us pasta with piles of home-minced meat smothered in tomato sauce and covered with béchamel, then drowned in fresh cream and grated cheese. Gone were the days when care was taken to protect our livers. Fortifying us was now the name of the game. Other items in her repertoire included cauliflower à la Polonaise (steamed and heaped with butter-fried breadcrumbs); sauerkraut with all the trimmings (available from Groppi) accompanied by bread knoedels; fresh noodles that she prepared from scratch, touched with the grace of her special tomato sauce; paper-thin pancakes filled with creamy chicken and mushrooms; meatballs which included egg, garlic and white bread soaked in milk, the mixture cooked in fresh butter and served with home-made ketchup; strudel bursting with apples and raisins, its top crispy with burnt sugar and sprinkled with extra icing sugar; and a cake slathered in mocha cream (the recipe was a secret, but required an entire packet of butter for the topping) and studded with whole hazelnuts, which was sure to give indigestion to less robust stomachs than ours. In time, Father became jealous of our feasts and complained that he felt deprived. Finally Nenna took over cooking for the

whole family and the kitchen in the basement was permanently closed. The last cook, made redundant, was sent packing.

Whether Dr B had failed to discern our extraordinary digestive faculties out of sheer incompetence (unless he actually caused our frequent ailments with his prescriptions, in order to maintain a thriving clientele) or whether his beastly diets prepared us to absorb quantities of rich food with impunity, I will never know; nor did I care at the time. I was much too busy looking forward to the next meal. Strangely, I alone seemed to expand as a result of this new regimen. My brother and sister remained as fragile as they had been in the days of our deprivation.

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The food I gorged on was not only confined to my body. My mind was also nourished in many various ways. When I was eight, my mother hired Haniya to look after the three of us. We no longer had foreign nannies who invariably clashed with each other and with Nenna. Mary, the last one, had left under a cloud after Maman caught her locked in the bathroom with Papa. She did not believe in marital scenes and preferred the indirect method, which entailed finding fault – or, better, asking her mother to find fault – in the performance of the nanny's duties. Following Nenna's wise advice, Mary had been replaced with Haniya, who was young enough to put up with our exhausting demands and my grandmother's Gestapo-like surveillance, but utterly devoid of the physical charms that might present a temptation for Papa. Haniya was also a devout Muslim and politically aware to boot. She resented having to serve in a family that, as far as she could see, showed little interest in either religion or politics.

Abla Sekina, a spinster employed in a government school, had been entrusted with the arduous task of teaching us Arabic in the afternoons. I think she also taught us the Qur'an on her own initiative. Haniya, who could barely read or write, sat in on the lessons and, when they were over, added her own brand of wisdom to the Word of God as reported to us by the Arabic teacher. Our mother, she said, would never be admitted to paradise, being a heathen. In the afterlife we would be separated, and she would burn in hell while we pranced freely in the gardens of Allah if we followed Abla Sekina's teachings. My brother in particular was promised infinite delights. Haniya was less certain of the pleasures that awaited us girls, but they could only be a vast improvement over the torments to which our mother would be submitted.

Haniya advised me to begin Maman's conversion at once if I wanted to save her, by translating to her relevant passages of the Qur'an. I did not find her particularly receptive. Having listened to my halting recitation for a while, she usually dismissed me with a smile: "I am happy you are making so much progress in Arabic," she'd say; "it is important to learn your father's language." At no point did she indicate that she had been divinely enlightened by my approximate rendition of the verses. Furthermore, I was puzzled by Abla Sekina's explanations of conversions, which I gathered might be carried out at the point of the sword, if resisted. I was not keen on continuing my hopeless efforts, and feared that my mentors would instruct me to pursue my mother with the kitchen knife, the only implement in the house that seemed remotely satisfactory in applying the injunction to convertir à la pointe de l'épée.

At one point, a radio was placed in our room to allow us to listen to the great sheikhs' readings of the Qur'an. We also listened to Baba Sharo, a very popular children's programme. In the absence of orders to the contrary, Haniya introduced us to singers like Abdel-Mutteleb, Farid El-Atrash, Asmahan, Mohamed Abdel-Wahab, Laila Murad and of course the great Umm Kulthoum. Soon Haniya and I were singing duets, she in the part of Farid El-Atrash or Abdel-Wahab and I trying my best to sound like Asmahan and Laila Murad. I had great fun until my mother caught us one day. She said nothing in front of Haniya but later told me that I had sounded so ridiculous imitating the baladi people that she had felt embarrassed for me. From then on, I tried as tactfully as possible to abstain from initiating our little performances. If Haniya was baladi, it was certainly not her fault and she should not be made to feel ashamed, I thought. I also resented my mother for making fun of me and thus depriving me of the pleasure of singing, which I never attempted after this incident, although I would have dearly loved to have a good voice.

Politics were another field in which Haniya felt it necessary to educate us. She hated King Farouk, who stole and squandered the country's money and never gave to the poor. Did I not see how *el-shaab el-ghalban* (the poor people) was suffering? So far, my only contact with *el-shaab* had been through the raised window of our car, when the driver stopped at a traffic light and the lepers stuck their open sores to the glass. My mother gave the driver coins that he extended to them, carefully avoiding any contact with their damaged skin. Other than that, we had been fully insulated from what my parents called "le peuple".

Then again, we were also isolated from people in very high places. One summer, holidaying in Alexandria, we had rented a villa adjoining that of Queen Farida's relatives. Looking over the bushes that separated the two gardens, we had seen the young princesses playing outside. They were roughly our age. Craving new company as much as we did, they signalled us to wait and disappeared into their house, probably to ask permission to invite us over. A few minutes later, a uniformed man arrived and asked Maman on behalf of the queen to take us next door. To our consternation, Maman refused politely, saying that it was time for our Arabic lesson. Even we realised that she had just committed the crime of lèse majesté. Furthermore, she had lied, because we never had lessons during the holidays; but I knew better than to point this out. For a while we were forbidden to go to the bottom of the garden. We fully expected the king himself to appear on our doorstep and chastise Maman, but nothing happened.

I never saw the princesses again, but, having heard Mother recount the incident to Father, gathered that my parents disapproved of their company. He simply commented that she had done the right thing, since princes and princesses were spoiled and would only teach us bad manners. For this reason, I immediately believed Haniya when she told me the famous story about King Farouk throwing gold coins into a pail of acid and watching his naïve servants try to retrieve them, then laughing heartily when they pulled out their skinned arms, screaming in pain. No wonder our parents did not want us to associate with such evil creatures. There was certainly another reason as well: it was not uncommon in those days for men who had attractive wives or mistresses to keep at a distance from the monarch. He was known to go after any woman that took his fancy and punish any husband who showed less than total cooperation. This is why when his arrival was announced at any of his popular haunts, several patrons would make a hasty exit before he could lay eyes on their partners.

Political assassinations were among Haniya's favourite topics, and I heard her perform a *zaghruta*, my first experience of the piercing ululation, when a nationalist assassinated Amin Osman, a pro-British minister. She hated the British with a passion that verged on mania and mimed for us what she would have done to British soldiers had she only been a man. Her attacks seemed to aim mainly at their private parts. She "opened our eyes" to Nahhas Pasha's vices (his wife), and virtues (his opposition to occupation), but accused him of still being much too soft on the British and only interested in furthering his own political career.

Student unrest and workers' demonstrations were a balm to her heart. Soon I was adding patriotic tidbits to Maman's waning religious instruction. If I could not manage to make her into a good Muslim, maybe she could become a nationalist and help Egypt gain its independence. After all, had she not dismissed one of our nannies because her lover, a British officer, had gotten drunk one night and come hollering under our windows that he wanted to be let in? The poor girl, whom I had just begun to like, was ordered to pack her bags in the morning. Later Maman had commented to Nenna that "his daughters' scandals" were quite enough; we did not need an errant nanny to disgrace us further.

Catching the tail of one of my own mimicked anti-British pronouncements one day, Papa asked me if Haniya did not think the Egyptians should learn something from our occupiers before throwing them out. Gathering my courage, I defended my newly acquired convictions as best I could, hoping that I would not start to stammer, as I usually did when forced to face him: "The British only know how to kill the poor, and the rich are their friends, so they too are traitors," I uttered carefully, albeit defiantly. My father opined that the British were good at keeping law and order and were excellent administrators. He did not claim they should not go, on the contrary; but they had said they would leave, so it was only reasonable to give them a chance to stand by their word, which he trusted they would do. Meanwhile, he had hoped that the Egyptians would be wise enough to learn efficiency and honesty from them and adopt their principles of fairness and self-respect. This was totally above my head and I was prudent enough not to essay another tirade. Too young to understand that Father was offering me a reasonable alternative to the popular point of view, I burst into tears and accused him of liking our enemies. I was promptly sent to my room, where Haniya and I plotted to convert him to anti-Briticism. He had been poisoned by his schooling in a British establishment, Haniya explained; like my mother, he was in dire need of a saviour.

Much later, I came to realise that Papa had given me my first lesson in the advantages of diplomatic solutions that day. He himself had marched in many demonstrations against the occupation when a student, but had also taken every advantage of what the British had to offer. Caught in the school library browsing one day, he was told by the British headmaster that he was not at school to learn what he chose to, but to absorb what they wanted to teach him – and that, Papa understood, was precisely as much information as was required to form obedient bureaucrats in His Majesty's service. He did not utter the words, of course, but from that moment on took every opportunity to sneak into the library for some extracurricular reading. Perhaps it was later, when he went to Paris, that he allied a tendency to reason out every problem with the rectitude and stiffness learned at the hands of the British. He was not given to "Oriental" outbursts, or to displays of extreme emotion. Only once in my life did I see him cry, and it was certainly not in connection with the country's political destiny.

During one of our holidays in Cyprus, we had moved from Platras to the higher mountains of Troudhos for a week of camping, or our interpretation thereof. Nobody had warned my parents that, at this time of year, the spot was particularly hot. The day after our arrival, my brother became suddenly desperately ill, with a very high temperature, probably caused by heatstroke. There were no doctors around and my father was desperate to secure a taxi that would take us back to Platras. It was almost nighttime when one finally arrived. Once we were in the car, Father began to sob. I was terrified, convinced that my brother, on Maman's lap in the front seat, had just died. I squeezed my baby sister's hand and kept completely quiet. As we approached our destination, however, Maman announced that my brother's temperature had begun to drop and he was no longer listless.

From that day on, I saw Father with different eyes, having discovered to my utter surprise that he was not as hard as I had always thought him to be. I discussed the incident with Haniya, who refused to concede that the Bey could be compassionate. Did he not say that we could learn from the forces that were humiliating us? What could they teach us, apart from cruelty and injustice? When the people took over, she was afraid the Bey would be punished like the rest of the Bashawat who had no feelings for their countrymen.



Our garden in Cyprus

Haniya, then, did not choose to weigh the pros and cons of the British presence. I understood that she distrusted Father and believed that he was covertly on the side of the enemy. To be in her good books I started tying a *mandil* (handkerchief) around my head when my

mother was not looking and pretended to be the new maid hired by the Bey to help her. I even called father that when I was alone with her. I concentrated on sighing the way she did when she bent down and smacked my lips when I ate. I pretended to harbour a single-minded attachment to my country, which I said I wanted free and Arab, as she did.

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Haniya despised anything that exhibited the slightest foreign flavour. She was forced to travel with us on our holidays to Cyprus and Switzerland but absolutely loathed the time spent outside Egypt. She sailed on ships and stayed in five-star hotels. She tried different foods and saw different sights, including high mountains, deep lakes and trees that did not grow in her native land. Nothing impressed her; nothing pleased her. She was excited only by the thought of our return, counting the days with sticks drawn on a piece of paper. She was also worried that some pork would be slipped into the soups or stews she was offered, and so confined herself to drinking tea and eating whole, recognisable pieces of chicken and green salad wherever we went.

If pork was a major problem for Haniya, it had never been one for us. We were brought up on ham sandwiches (only the lean part was allowed by Dr Bossi; but I made it my business to hang around while Maman discarded the white rim and, given half a chance, I would quickly wolf it down before she noticed) and Papa claimed that fear of pork was a leftover superstition from times when refrigerators had not yet been invented. He tucked into his pork roast with much gusto as soon as we reached Europe, because, he said, pork could only be enjoyed properly in cold climates, its fat being heavy on the stomach. To complement the hotel fare, which was never to Maman's liking, she always bought ham and sausages at a delicatessen for our elevenses. I insisted on accompanying her on this particular errand, although I was generally lazy and avoided any activity that required moving my body. I had found out that on the way back, I could carry the various packets and thus extract a slice of salami here and a piece of ham there as I loitered behind her. I was only found out when I ate a whole raw cervelat: I had to confess, if only out of fear that she would go back to claim it from the charcuterie. When Haniya took over, we were deprived of this tasty but haram meat. She watched without a word as Maman packed our picnic sandwiches; then, slinging the bag over her shoulder, she took us for long walks in the forest. When it was time to eat, she removed the slices of meat and, with a stick, scraped off the butter that had touched the forbidden ingredient. She then handed us the cleansed bread while muttering, as if to herself: "This woman wants to take these poor children to hell with her. I don't understand. Doesn't she know they are Muslim?" We never told our mother about the religious transformation that befell our sandwiches, although I was tempted to do so on occasion, being quite partial to Swiss cervelat. We understood that our nanny was trying to save our souls, which, she had told us, were infinitely more valuable than our taste buds.

AWAKENING

I was kept out of school because Maman feared killer diseases such as typhoid, diphtheria and polio, as well as lesser ailments. Except for Abla Sekina, who insisted on the Qur'an, my private tutors were quite happy to concentrate on my areas of interest, which did not include arithmetic. I had learned to read fairly quickly and spent my leisure time pouring over anything I could lay my hands on, including Maman's forbidden copies of *Elle* and *Marie Claire*. I was particularly fascinated by Marcelle Ségal (the famous French agony aunt) and her Courrier du Coeur, through which I caught my very first glimpse of female sexuality. Unwittingly, this famous journalist taught me the rudiments of eroticism. The letters sent by her readers also enlightened me with regard to menstruation and childbearing.



In our garden

The most detailed piece of information in this realm, however, was imparted to me by Jean, a ten-year-old boy who had befriended me during our holidays in Flims, a popular resort in the Swiss mountains. That particular summer at the hotel, the children were divided between those "who knew" and those "who didn't". I belonged to the latter category and Jean to the former, but he used to talk to me when his friends were not around because, he said, I was quite intelligent for my years. He felt virtuous doing so, since, as he put it with as much tact as he could muster at such an early age, God had not been very inspired when deciding on my looks.

It was thus clear from the beginning that his interest in me was purely intellectual. Jean felt that I would benefit from his highly developed knowledge of worldly things, and one day, as we walked in the vast gardens of the hotel, having made me swear never to tell

who had opened my eyes, he blurted: "Now I'll tell you where you come from." I stopped myself before telling him that I came from Egypt and that it was no secret. I sensed that Jean needed to be taken seriously, so I pretended not to know. "Your father puts his 'thing' into your mother's and he pees inside her; nine months later a child is born," he recited quickly. Had I known about drugs then, I would have thought that he was on something. Instead, I simply reflected to myself that he was mad, or just pulling my leg. For one, I had often heard Father performing this particular bodily function. He always left the bathroom door ajar (maybe to signal to our nanny that she was welcome to follow him in). I had noticed that Maman frowned at this habit and that Nenna, less inclined to patience, slammed the door shut if she happened to be passing. Furthermore, since my "accident", I knew it was an unmitigated disaster to relieve oneself anywhere outside the recipient strictly reserved for this use. I shook my head. "You know, Jean," I said, trying to sound old and experienced, "only people who do not have a bathroom are forced to do it that way." Echoing the same elitist thought a generation later, my own daughter, informed by a classmate that I had "pooed" her baby sister, retorted snootily that we did not make our babies at home, since we could afford to purchase them from David Jones (a chic department store in Sydney). As further proof, she had offered the fact that she had ordered a little girl with curly hair and blue eyes, and that was exactly what we had presented her with.

Jean simply looked disgusted with me. He had thought he would bowl me over and instead of showing admiration and undying gratitude, I had come up with an inane explanation. He shrugged at my narrow-mindedness and left me standing there. The following day, I saw him walking in the garden with another girl and doing his best to avoid looking my way. I was rather upset that he had lost faith in my intelligence. He sulked quite stubbornly and barely said a word to me when we met in the hotel playground. Apart from my brother, he was the very first boy I had spoken to, and I was quite aware that the encounter had ended to my disadvantage. I had little time to mull over our falling out, however. We were about to leave Flims in a hurry.

Maman who had been incessantly complaining about the food, called the waiter to our table a few days later. "What, exactly, is this?" she inquired icily, pointing at her plate. The waiter looked at her uncomprehendingly, then mumbled that it was chicken à la king. "Whose king?" asked my mother. "This food is not fit for a dog." An ominous silence fell, spreading to the tables next to ours, where the guests had been watching the exchange with interest. All eyes had turned towards Papa who, oblivious to his surroundings, had been enjoying his portion of canine fare. Upon hearing my mother, he brusquely pushed his plate and walked out of the dining room in arctic silence. The following day, we were off to Zurich, whence we continued to Lausanne. There, we always stayed in a hotel that, according to my mother, served the very best food in the world: "almost like home."

The Royal Savoy at Croix d'Ouchy was attractive in many ways. Not only was the food always delicious, the hotel was situated just opposite the building where Maman and Nenna had spent the First World War years. It made them smile as they tried to remember the details of their life at the time. No matter how hard it had been, they both enjoyed looking at their erstwhile balcony. There was a belfry in the vicinity and Nenna had sat embroidering by the window, betting with Maman that she would finish a whole flower before they heard the clock chime the hour. They cherished these memories and discussed them together in lengthy details.

The hotel guests included many Egyptian pashas, as well as international sovereigns who had lost their crowns. The former queen of Spain had resided there before renting a villa nearby; the kings of Italy and Greece were habitués, as was a set of lesser princes and princesses who spent part of the year in Switzerland. Our best friends were two Italian princes who introduced us to their cousin Juan Carlos, the future king of Spain, with whom I once played golf; Athena, a relative of the king of Greece and the first teenager I had seen hiding behind a tree to smoke a cigarette; and Marina, an Italian goody two-shoes who was training to become a tennis champion. One rainy day, as we played Chinese checkers, Marco, the eldest of the Italian princes, came into the drawing room to announce that the king of Yugoslavia was going to join us and that we should all rise when he appeared. We expected a real grownup king, and when a uniformed nanny appeared holding a chubby little boy of six by the hand, no one thought of moving. Marco was furious with us and told us sternly afterwards that we had offended the king. The boy-king had not seemed to mind, however, and had played with us quite happily.

Françoise, my Swiss friend, used to join us in our pranks, which mainly entailed lurking in the corridors at dawn or after midnight and moving the guests' shoes (left outside the rooms for polishing) from one door to the other, then hiding to watch the owners' confusion. Françoise and I also spent time at her house. We rode on the bus alone, which I had never been allowed to do in Egypt. I felt grownup and responsible and began to entertain dreams of returning to Lausanne after I had finished school. Françoise and I would rent an apartment together and go to university, but, more importantly, be free to lead the same life as my stepsisters. When her parents were out, her brother Jean-Marc showed us the hiding place where their father kept pornographic books. He owned the most famous library in Lausanne and the books were of works of art, a fact we recognised even though our intentions at first had not included an initiation to high-quality etchings.

Françoise also introduced me to a dish I preferred to the more sophisticated fare of the hotel. She and Jean-Marc cut potatoes in halves and stuffed them with Gruyere cheese before placing them in the oven. Sprinkled with salt and pepper, these tidbits were served with slices of hot salami. For dessert, we consumed quantities of fresh oranges and mandarins, standing on the balcony and spitting the pits onto passersby, thinking this was the wittiest thing we had done in a long time. I drew the line at imbibing their parents' liquor and smoking their cigarettes. Returning to the hotel drunk and reeking of nicotine would not have encouraged my mother to let me visit Françoise again.

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After the Jean incident (his remark about my awkward physique had found its mark), I erased any conscious thought of boys from my life. I was sixteen when I had my next meaningful relationship. In this department, compared to my classmates, I was a late bloomer.

I had already experienced strange feelings, not unlike urges to climb a peak that I would never be able to reach, when I lay in bed. This only happened in summer and I associated the phenomenon with the warmth of the weather. It took me a while to discover that the mood was provoked by the rough sheet rubbing against my nipples through flimsy pyjamas.

The same emotion overcame me one day at the beach when I was around nine, and a young woman stopped and smiled at me. She weighed my heavy braids in her hand and told me I had beautiful hair. She instantly became my idol. I deployed treasures of cunning to find out who she was and where her cabin was situated. My heart beat madly whenever I saw her, or imagined that I saw her, approaching. I dreamt about her and thought that I was in love, but after a while the feeling fizzled of its own accord.

A few months later, I was confronted with the same emotion once again; this time, however, I quite unexpectedly discovered its climax. It happened the first time I tasted Groppi's Neapolitan cake, an unbelievably scrumptious mixture, positively bursting with mellow candied fruit, drowned in rum and glazed with apricot jelly. After the second slice I was convinced that I had just discovered the real meaning of paradise. With hindsight, I believe that my experience was positively orgasmic. Nothing in later life even approached such unadulterated pleasure.

Still, I always imagined that I would meet a man one day and that from then on life would never be the same. I secretly awaited the momentous encounter, but at the same time wanted to give others the idea that I was a very serious person, more career-minded than interested in marriage and children. Soon after I had begun to excel in school, Papa had commented that I should not take myself too seriously. He did not want to make a savant out of me; girls with too much knowledge did not find husbands. Men in general and Orientals in particular disliked overeducated women, he explained. He did not specify how much education was "over," however, and I felt that I had a long way to go before reaching this point. Little did I know that whatever knowledge I acquired would stand as an obstacle between me and the men I met. I had failed to read Father's message correctly: men only liked women who made them feel superior. I wasted many witticisms and clever repartees on fools whose only requirement was that I lisp charmingly, "oh dahling, you are tho cwever!"

In time, without fully realising the change that was taking place, I began to favour my make-believe persona. I leaned toward becoming a career woman although I had no idea which career I wanted to embrace. At the same time, I wanted to keep my options open in case I met someone as overpowering as Papa (but preferably nicer). And the desire to enjoy the glamourous life of a single woman like my sisters remained an exciting alternative.

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1947 was an eventful year in my life. Haniya had begun to talk to us about the Muslim Brotherhood and the name of the group's leader, Hassan El-Banna, often recurred in her monologues. She had warned us not to mention him in front of Papa, however. It is a mystery how, as an almost illiterate live-in nanny, she succeeded in keeping abreast of events that were happening so far from our closed circle. She always described the demonstrations vividly, as a sea of young men moving together like powerful waves, and systematically inflated the number of those who had fallen for "the honour of our country." Her mood changed with the ministries. When she found out that we were holidaying in Cyprus that year (a change from Alexandria, my parents had said), she cried for days on end. She needed her job, she told us, and could not hand in her notice, because her mother's medicine was so expensive, and who would pay for it if she did not work? But she was sure that something momentous would take place while she was away in the lands of the heathen, with no way of knowing about it.



With Mother and Haniya at the Antoniadis gardens in Alexandria

Something did happen, as we were about to return to Egypt in September: a cholera epidemic that hit Cairo like a bomb. The government acted swiftly and efficiently, but the news convinced my parents that it was imperative to wait out the crisis in our house in the mountains. Only Papa would go back, leaving us (and Haniya) behind. Of these months in the desolate little resort of Platras, abandoned by its seasonal population, I remember little, except that it was extremely cold and that we had only a wooden stove that Nenna and Maria, the Cypriot maid, kept going day and night in an attempt to raise the house's temperature. One night, the lights went out and we all huddled near the stove because we were afraid to go to bed in the dark. At one point, Nenna went to the toilet and a few minutes later, we heard her scream. As she was sitting there, something had bitten her bottom. We laughed so hard that we gathered the courage to take ourselves to our rooms. A few days later, she called out again under the same circumstances. This time the lights were on, however and she had time to glimpse the snout of a fat rat slipping back into the drain. The way Maria got rid of the rodent was kept a secret from us, but I don't think it was very pleasant for the poor creature, since it involved throwing lots of boiling water down the hole.

When the weather was warmer, which was not often, we climbed the little lane that ran past our house to play with William, Mary and Winifred, the children of a retired and British colonel, a widower who had chosen this eagle's retreat to keep his brood out of harm's way. Our friends had a private live-in tutor and were seldom given an afternoon off. We began to speak English fluently; but the colonel decided that even we, though much younger than his children, were too rowdy, and he did not encourage more frequent encounters.

Our return from exile (a favourite game, which Haniya invented, was to pretend that we were Saad Zaghlul and his followers, forced to live in the Seychelles. I personally preferred to be Heidi in the Swiss Alps, but did not dare say so) was momentous. To board our ship in Limasol, we had to approach it in a small craft, which had been loaded with the six of us, together with our numerous suitcases. Three officers carried us children on board, but Nenna had to hoist herself up the steep gangplank without help and I had a fit of giggles at the thought that she might fall into the sea. I imagined the sailors shouting "woman ahoy" and one of them gallantly diving in to retrieve her, a large fish clad in a camelhair coat and crocodile shoes. I found the notion absolutely sidesplitting.

Father was waiting for us in Alexandria. He had not seen us for over three months and seemed unusually happy and talkative. We were all shouting excitedly, Haniya bending to kiss the earth of her country, when he suddenly turned to me and snapped: "What's four times ten?" I goggled at him. "That's what I thought," he said; and, before we had even clambered into the waiting cars, he declared that I would be going to school.

Haniya had been right. Soon the events that she had anticipated began to echo even in our secure house. On 15 May 1948, as I was finishing my first year in school, the British mandate in Palestine expired and British troops pulled out. The State of Israel was declared and recognised at once by the US and the Soviet Union. Furious, the Arabs demanded a war. Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmi El-Nuqrashi hesitated, knowing that the Egyptian army was not ready for such a confrontation. The king, fearing that the Muslim Brotherhood would exploit his Jewish connections (following in his father's footsteps, King Farouk favoured Jewish mistresses), overruled him. The Muslim Brothers were armed, dangerous and ready for war. Better send them to Palestine than taste their fury himself, the king must have reasoned.

As the supreme leader of the Arab world, Farouk, who wished to become Caliph of the Muslims, was duty-bound to lead the jihad. He hastened to declare it, lest another Arab leader cheat him out of this savoury role.

At first, King Farouk played war games. Mounted on a stallion and dressed in his field marshal's uniform, he inspected his troops, handed out thousands of Qur'ans, awarded military ranks to his sisters, and commissioned a new avenue, stretching from the airport in Heliopolis to Mohamed Ali Square. This Egyptian equivalent of the Champs Elysées was designed to receive the conquering troops on their return.

The Jihad was a disaster, Israel was not vanquished, and the victory parade never took place. When the truth began to sink in, the members of Farouk's personal cabinet – Antonio Pulli, the palace mechanic; Edmond Galhan, a Lebanese merchant made chief of procurement for the palace; Elias Andraous, a Greek land speculator; and Karim Thabet, the despised Lebanese minister of information – were accused of having made fortunes on defective Italian weapons that exploded in the soldiers' faces. The Egyptians had forgiven Farouk his dissolute life and their endemic starvation; they had lost loved ones to malaria and cholera epidemics, and still found the strength to shout "Long Live the King." Now they finally lost patience with him. He had truly betrayed them this time. They began to talk freely about his friends, especially Pulli, the palace pimp; it was said that the Queen Farida had hated him from the start. It was also whispered that she was extremely unhappy and had taken a lover, a cousin of whom she had been fond before

being forced to marry the king. And now, with all his boasting and posturing, Farouk had made a mockery of the people, and sold Palestinians' rights to their country.

Father was devastated. While in Cyprus, he had befriended members of the provisional Palestinian government and had often taken part in their discussions, advising them on policy and arguing that they should wage a war of attrition instead of launching an open confrontation. He grieved for the young men who had tried so hard to prevent the creation of the "Jewish state," and was appalled at the extent of the catastrophe when the refugees made their way to Egypt after the Nakba (the loss of Arab Palestine).

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I did not know whether I was allowed to mention the war at school. From the beginning, my relations with my classmates had been extremely difficult, maybe because I had not had a chance to bond with them in kindergarten, or simply, as they often said, because I was weird. I had arrived one day, long after the school year had started, a rather bulky ten-year-old in a class where the average age was eight. My companions immediately classified me as a strange phenomenon. They had a point: I was tall, fat and extremely clumsy, blushed every time I was spoken to and in answer to any question could only repeat "moi?", since I was unsure that the teacher was addressing me. My shortsightedness aggravated this particular problem, but I had kept it a secret from everybody, fearing that my parents would accuse me of making things up in order to continue staying at home. To add to my physical handicaps, I was neither an authentic Egyptian nor a foreigner. I was not even Jewish, and therefore not entitled to the special attention lavished on them by our French teachers, who never mentioned the crime of Israel's creation but spoke constantly of Jewish suffering. Later, of all the girls at the Lycée, I got along with my Jewish classmates best, possibly because we shared the same feelings of confusion as to our identity. Like them we spoke french at home, although neither of my parents was French, even if Maman had been born in Paris. This choice of language was quite accidental: my mother spoke German and French, while German was not among the languages Papa had mastered. Since he was annoyed when Maman and Nenna spoke together in their native tongue, leaving him out of the conversation, German was dropped altogether (a good thing too, since with the Allies' victory, speaking German fluently was not the best of references). The first words I heard were therefore in French, and it seemed normal to continue my education in a language both my parents spoke fluently.

Before I went to school, I had been vaguely instructed in both my parents' religions, learning Muslim prayers from Abla Sekina and Haniya, and Christian ones from Nenna, who whispered the words while I knelt over a picture of the Virgin Mary. As a result, I was not really sure who I was, unlike my other companions, for whom nationality and religion were given. I neither performed the ritual daily prayers nor fasted during Ramadan. My only living grandparent certainly had no wish to accomplish the pilgrimage to Mecca before she died. I polished off trays of kahk during the Eid, but had no idea of the tradition's roots; and we kept Bairam sheep as pets in our garden, returning the older ones to our '*ezba*, a place we had never seen and which my mother described as infested with flies and fleas. We had gorgeous Christmases with a huge tree and lots of presents; but no one in our house went to midnight mass or even mentioned Jesus.

Politics, too, limited my integration in the school environment. The parents of all the Egyptian girls in my class were staunch Wafdists, while Papa was emphatically not. He had belonged to

the Liberal Constitutional party, a minority party comprising primarily large landowners. Among them were several free thinkers who prided themselves on their "objective views." Papa made a single attempt to shake my budding chauvinism, but replaced these early convictions with nothing of consequence. Perhaps he believed that I was too young to understand more; besides, I was not even a boy. I therefore had precious little to add when my Egyptian companions discussed Wafdist news among themselves; I was excluded from their hushed conversations, except when they sent me to keep watch and warn them if a teacher was approaching. Religion and politics were forbidden subjects at school. I could not help noticing that "authentic" Egyptian Muslim girls had a totally different upbringing, featuring vigorous patriotism and a fundamental respect for religious tradition. Today, I am not sure that my own lack of interest was due to my mother's influence, as I thought then. Rather, the source of my alienation was my father's apparent indifference to his own heritage.

While I tried to broach these difficult subjects with Haniya attempting to explain why I had more affinity with my foreign classmates than my Egyptian ones, she was only willing to talk about Palestine. Her anguish was almost palpable and I had to abandon any tentative of introducing her to my new world concentrating instead on what was happening on the front. She was beside herself, seething with rage – maybe more so because she had seen the enemy close up, in Cyprus. She needed someone with whom to discuss the events. I felt I owed her some of my time, although I did not managed to share her hatred. I too had seen a number of Jews at the Pension Viennoise in Platras, dumpy men and women gorging on sacher torte, the house specialty. I had observed them in the morning, at La Kilada Café, sampling the local delicacies and daintily liking their lips after a taste of candied walnuts or a spoonful of mastic jam. They looked ordinary and harmless. There had been Palestinian men, too, at this particular café, furiously discussing something among themselves. I never saw any of them at the Pension Viennoise, however, probably because it was managed by a Jewish couple. The Jews were forever squabbling and often self-deprecating; the men's humour took an insulting tinge when they made fun of their complaining wives. The Palestinians, on the other hand, were virile and dashing with no nagging women at their side – although prone to glancing rather sneakily at the women seated at other tables. They were real warriors and would certainly prevail, I had assured Haniya a few days before the event.

I was wrong, of course, and, when the air raid sirens began to sound in Cairo, she could stand it no more. She had several sobbing spells and completely broke down on the day of the Nakba. She left us soon after to enrol as a nurse at one of the hospitals, all of which, it was believed, were crammed with war casualties. Haniya eventually married and divorced, but her only daughter, a pretty girl she named after my sister, stayed with her and benefited from her mother's frustrated dreams: she went to university, where she studied medicine. Haniya herself retired only recently, after becoming head nurse at one of Cairo's most important hospitals.

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After Haniya's hasty departure I had nothing to distract me from my new environment. I began to carry torches for my female teachers – a new one every year. This state of mind was instrumental to my academic performance. Only good grades could attract their attention, and so I made it my business to collect them. Strangely, I never aspired to physical contact. I found the idea repellent. I wanted their consideration and affection,

however and I craved their compliments. In front of them, I was often tongue-tied, but at home I imagined myself dazzling them with my sense of humour and the aptness of my remarks. Somehow, I felt embarrassed by my feelings, suspecting that they were wrong (Marcelle Ségal's letters only addressed problems between men and women) and never discussed them with any of my companions. Only when I began to read Colette was I reassured: I was not the only girl in the world to have crushes on her teachers. I resented Maman, who saw through my sudden tantrums when she made fun of my teachers, and hinted that there was something slightly odd in the adoration I lavished on the chosen one. If I needed to admire someone, she asked repeatedly, why didn't I choose to worship my own mother? These women did not care about me as she did, and once the year was over they forgot even my name. She did not understand, nor did I know how to tell her, that I needed each of them just for one year, to make my days at school more enjoyable and exciting.

For my bad luck one of my companions was caught by her mother reading Colette's *Claudine à l'école*, a favourite novel of mine, which described the feelings of a schoolgirl who had a crush of her female teacher. I had been imprudent enough to lend Hélène the book. Her mother complained to the headmistress and I found myself in serious trouble. The book, I was told, was clearly listed among the works the Vatican had forbidden. I thought it rather funny that a secular school promoting liberal education could resort to the Vatican's Index in censoring our readings if necessary. "But I am a Muslim; Vatican prohibitions do not apply to me," I protested. Apparently they did, because I was expelled from school for a month as proof that religious arguments could be flexible enough to be wielded as weapons by those who knew how to manipulate the rules.

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Haniya had just left us when the scandal of the defective arms that "caused us to lose the war" became public, and I found myself deprived of arguments with which to break my father's enigmatic silence whenever I tried to broach the subject with him, although he was quite vocal with his Friday morning visitors, a restricted group of politically disillusioned men who came to spend time with him once a week and discuss current events in private. I eavesdropped, of course, whenever I had the chance. Papa seemed to have developed two firm convictions, one particular and one general: the former concerned corruption, which had reached epidemic proportions, afflicting everybody from the king to the most insignificant messenger boy in government employ; the latter was related to the futility of war. He did not believe anything could be gained from fighting and spoke out in favour of peaceful settlement or, failing that, a war of attrition. He doubted very much that the Jews needed a state of their own, and suspected that the great powers, suffering or fearing the loss of their empires, wanted, like Goha, to plant a "nail" in the Middle East. This, he explained, would allow them to intervene in the name of the new state and dictate policy to the Arab countries. If the Jewish Agency had been so successful, it was only because it had received covert support from England in particular, whose politicians had deciphered the writing on the wall in the Middle East. They were still smarting from the events in India and were not about to give up on their other overseas possessions without a fight.

On the other hand, the Middle East was bound to star in the Cold War and the United States had a vested interest in Israel's existence. Egypt had been flirting with communism



The three of us in Alexandria

for a long time, and this scared America witless. From the onset of the war, the Palestinians' cause had been doomed for these reasons, he said, so it was not really a question of how efficient the weapons had been. Under the circumstances, Egypt never should have declared an open war. That someone may have profited from the arms deal underlined our homegrown shortcomings in conducting our affairs, but only marginally exacerbated what was bound to be an unmitigated disaster.

Since he had abandoned his political career in favour of his legal practice just before his second marriage, my father usually resisted being drawn into discussion on such topics. His opinions were not always mainstream and, expressed publicly, were liable to attract him a good deal of trouble. This is why he confined his diatribes to the Friday morning coffee sessions, behind closed doors. Only in 1954, during the Revolution's March crisis, did he go back to speaking his mind openly, stating that the officers should return to their barracks and an elected government be formed to establish democracy in Egypt. It was no use ridding the country of a corrupt monarchy if a military dictatorship was to replace it. In the long run, it would ruin us far more decisively than the futile king could have.

By this time, the peasants who had worked on his land were making their way to his office one by one in secret, offering to sell him back their plots, which they had no capital to exploit. He felt great disappointment in the agrarian reform, which he had applauded at first but which, he now said, had not been well thought out and had devastated Egypt's agricultural future in two very short years. Although many people we knew subscribed to these beliefs, opposition to the new regime was never sufficiently organised or powerful to make a difference. After the March revolt failed, and the officers tightened their grip on the country, Father remained quite outspoken, but for some reason he was unharmed, notwithstanding the Revolutionary Tribunal and the Mukhabarat (the dreaded secret intelligence) that did not spare other men of his generation.

Meanwhile, our routine prevailed as it had before. Palestine was lost but it never occurred to me that we children could be influenced in any way by the events that were shaping our landscape. In little over a decade, however, they would completely transform our way of life.

CONTESTED BACKGROUND

Papa, born in Beni Suef, often told us about his impoverished childhood. He had walked all the way to Cairo when he was 12, because he wanted to study here and become a lawyer like his older brother. Maman said that Beni Suef was much too far for him to walk, and insisted that I had made up most of the stories I thought I knew about my father. He died in 1969, while I was in Australia, and can no longer be asked to arbitrate. I am beginning to believe that we were lied to so often when we were young, with the aim of presenting us with parental role models, that our mother had forgotten the lies, or why they were told in the first place.



My uncle Sayed Zaki (right) with the love of his life

Uncontested, however, are other details about the first years of his life. He was born in a rather important town of Upper Egypt to the family of a petty army officer who had married and settled in the nearby village of Bebbah long before my father's birth. My paternal grandmother was 12 on her wedding day. The following year, she gave birth to her first child. The couple had four boys and two girls in a row, all of whom had celebrated their twentieth birthday when my father appeared on the scene. During a row with her husband, maybe with

regard to his excessive philandering (the older generation in our village still alludes to his reputation as a "man" after a century), my paternal grandmother swore that she would never again let him near her. She kept her vow for quarter of a century, during which the couple did not exchange a word. It is to my grandfather's credit that he refused to divorce his wife or even take another one, as was the custom. Soon after they finally made up, my father was born.


My uncle the big spender

A number of years before Papa's birth, his older brother Mahmoud had settled in Cairo to study. There, he befriended the right people and was noticed by a prominent lawyer who offered him a position in his cabinet. He soon became so successful in his profession that different political figures were wooing him in the hope that he would join their party. He also did well financially and within a few years was able to build himself a grand house in Beni Suef (sequestrated during the first few months of the Revolution, it is now the Beni Suef Court of Appeals) and buy land in the surrounding villages. He moved his parents, brothers and sisters into the new house and entrusted the land to the men of the family.

As fortune smiled upon him, more land was purchased and many relatives came from the environs to help cultivate the vast fields and look after the livestock. Two of his brothers chose to stay in Beni Suef, while the third eventually followed him to Cairo. In time, one of the sisters was given in marriage to an older man who already had a wife and children, while the other remained at home against her will, to serve her mother and the men.

My grandparents, no longer young, must have been bewildered by this upheaval in their quiet life, crowned by the arrival of a baby boy who could have easily been fathered by one of their grown sons. Father was mainly left in his sister's care and sent to the kuttab when time came for him to be instructed in the Qur'an. The little boy listened to his elders, however and learned about the advantages of having an education – only acquired, it seemed, by travelling to the capital. He too wanted to be part of the rural exodus of young men in search of knowledge. When he talked about his childhood, Father described a world overshadowed by his siblings and of decisions made without consulting him. One of his favourite stories involved his being deprived of eggs for many years because he had once said that he did not like them. "From then on," he recounted, "whenever we had eggs, there were none for me. My sister would encourage everyone to take several, saying 'Mohamed does not like eggs: they will go to waste..." As soon as he could afford an apartment of his own, Papa made sure to eat eggs every single day. When I was a child, he had four for breakfast, generously ladled with honey and accompanied by a large spoonful of fresh cream skimmed off the milk pot.

Gastronomic preferences were not the only thing my father's family controlled. They also determined his future, which involved looking after the land since according to their correct calculations he would be one day the only heir. Father had other ideas, however; on one of his walks around the property when he was about six, he heard voices through the open window of a neighbouring house and discovered that a little boy was having private lessons there. He hid in a bougainvillea thicket and listened in. After a few sessions, he felt he was learning faster than the legitimate pupil and was upset that he could not try his hand at writing. One day, the boy's mother caught him as he was trying to peep inside, but instead of complaining to his parents, she invited him to attend the lessons with her son. He was elated and kept a candle burning for the woman, who had set him on his way to success. It is during those years that he decided to hoof it to Cairo, and whether his version or my mother's prevails – whether he really walked all the way or was taken there – he made it to the capital, and promptly enrolled in a government school.

Favours did not come easily, though. Uncle Mahmoud was not prepared to be just a generous benefactor. In the evenings, my father had to drive his older brother's carriage and wait outside with the horse while his sibling visited various nightspots, met his friends in cafés, or spent part of the night with one of his numerous mistresses. During Ramadan, an occasion respected by my father, but not by my uncle, the routine was the same, so Papa often broke his fast with nothing more than a cup of water and was not home in time to eat a proper meal before dawn. Furthermore, apart from serving Mahmoud at home, one of his duties consisted of standing in front of the older man and fanning him with a newspaper while he relieved himself. Father absolutely hated the daily ordeal but as he pointed out, in those days an education was hard to come by.

In his last year of high school, he took his books with him and studied in the light of the coach lantern. Now his services were shared between Mahmoud and his other brother, Sayed-Zaki, who had fallen head over heels in lust with Badia Masabni, a Syrian entertainer who owned one of the most famous cabarets in Emadeddin Street. As the romance progressed, Papa had to drive the couple to their hideout and wait all night to take his brother back home, or to the hammam where he recovered from his nocturnal revels before turning to the day's business.

Being Badia's favourite beau required a great deal of money, more than Uncle Sayed-Zaki could ever hope to have. He began to borrow right, left and centre hoping (quite rightly) that Mahmoud would follow after him, paying his debts so as to avoid a scandal. Father often had to retrace the route taken the night before, albeit with a different brother, in a bid to effect much-needed damage control. Finally, Sayed-Zaki had no one to borrow from anymore, and had to watch first hand as his paramour swiftly turned her sights on a more solvent suitor. The betrayal hurt him so much that he dropped dead in the very cabaret where, not so long before, he had won his short-lived triumph. Father commented that it was good thing he died when he did because he had been well on his way to ruining the family completely.

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Father was growing up fast, and his desperate attempts to conjugate studious days with sleepless nights affected his health in the end. At one point, an eye infection made him temporarily unable to read and he would have failed his exams had not a gentle soul, an

Italian girl who lived in the same building, read him his lessons out loud every day. This is how Laura, my father's first wife, usually made her first appearance in his account. I had every reason to believe that he was telling the truth, and that they had fallen in love during the reading sessions. From here on, his version differed considerably from Maman's. Papa used to say that he had married Laura against his parents' wishes. They disliked her because she was a foreigner, Christian and working-class. He and Laura had been forced to move to Como after his family rejected the new bride. There, they were taken in by Mamma Emma, his mother-in-law. At last, when their first daughter was born, the family in Cairo relented. Maman's account did not follow the same lines. "He may have moved with her from Ciccolani Street in Shubra to Emadeddin downtown, because his brother was appalled at his choice of a bride, but not much further," she once said sarcastically, as we discussed (yet again) the dubious circumstances of my eldest stepsister's birth. "The family had no say in the matter. They were beholden to Mahmoud, who made all the decisions." At one point Mahmoud had summoned their father to Cairo in an effort to make his young brother abandon Laura. Father was even thrown out of the family's legal practice; undeterred, he acquired a clientele in the province, specialising in disputes among the peasants. "As it happened," Maman went on, "their father was bewitched by life in the capital and moved in with Mahmoud, bringing the spinster sister along to attend to the household chores. He did not manage to change your father's mind, however." Even twenty years after my father and stepsister died (less than two years apart), Maman's acerbity continued to thrive on her memories.

According to her, Laura had lived in the basement of the building where my uncle Mahmoud had his apartment in Shubra, an exclusive part of Cairo since the years when Mohamed Ali had built his glorious palace in the area. This is naturally where my father found accommodation on his arrival from Beni Suef, and this is how he became acquainted with the Italian girl, her mother and stepfather. Maman doubted that Laura had been of assistance to Father in any studious endeavours. She suspected her of being illiterate: the story about the reading sessions must have been the excuse he gave his brother to lock himself up with her in a room where they certainly did not spend their evenings poring over legal textbooks. "Your father met Laura when she was still a virgin. They had an affair for a few months, then one day she simply vanished. Your father did not try to find out what had happened to her; by this time he had acquired more refined tastes and was interested in more sophisticated partners – in this case, a French married woman (Jeanne) who lived on the top floor." This explanation had the advantage of imparting in one sentence two important pieces of information: my father was an inveterate womaniser, and silly Laura had got what she deserved. Anyway, Jeanne had been a godsend, because she taught my father good continental manners as well as French, both of which advanced him in his career tremendously.

Not long after Laura's disappearance, Father had a chance encounter with her stepfather, who reproached him for his lack of heart. The girl was in Italy, where she had given birth to a baby girl for whom my father undoubtedly shared responsibility. It was planned that she would give the child up for adoption, then enter a convent. Father, probably moved by the idea of the baby about to be abandoned, or simply shamed into doing the honourable thing, told the stepfather that he would marry Laura if she changed her plans and decided to return. She did, as fast as she could find third-class passage on a ship, and he kept his promise; but although he always claimed that the child was

born a year later, my mother suspected that on her arrival the young woman had presented him with an already bouncing daughter.

This mattered a great deal, because it meant that my sister was a whole three years older than Maman, who was counting on her youth to stir Father's tender feelings. An even more compelling reason for her spiteful insistence emerged only much later: "As I remember it, your father had a great deal of trouble with your sister's identity papers," she remarked once. "I always thought there was something fishy, going on there. Obviously, your father considered the circumstances of the baby's birth a shameful secret, especially because he hoped for a bright future in politics. King Fouad liked him well enough, but an illegitimate child would not have been a decoration to wear proudly at official receptions; hence the necessity to place himself in Italy with Laura at that particular time and the fable about his sojourn in Como. He did go there, mind you, but on holiday – and by that time he had two daughters, not one." Maman admitted that she did not have a shred of evidence to substantiate these claims, which were a typical example of the gossip going around the foreign community about Egyptians who had trespassed into their world. Extraordinary stories were constantly made up and embellished, mainly inspired by ideas of Egyptian males' allegedly rampant desires, and the excesses that excited expatriates' prurient curiosity.

But Maman also had personal reasons for preferring the less respectable account. She was seemingly still inordinately jealous of her predecessor. Not only had Laura – according to the legend – given birth to a baby out of wedlock (a mortal sin) without incurring divine punishment (this failure nevertheless, did not prevent Maman from keeping God's wrath potentially poised over our heads, acting as if she had tested the system and found it in perfect working order), but Papa had married Laura when he was young and carefree and for over twenty years had made her a very happy woman, at least according to her daughters. His first wife had enjoyed his youth, confidence in the future and joie de vivre. Instead of counting her blessings, she had given him up when he was no longer fun to be with, burdened as he had become with the responsibilities of a successful political career. When Maman met him, she was barely 22, while he was 48. She had arrived just in time to share his middle age, his grumpy moods when he was unwell, and his diminished fortune when the agrarian reform dispossessed him of a large share in his family's estate. From that time on, he watched what he considered irresponsible politics, a declining monarchy of puppets followed by a failed revolution with barely concealed rage, reflected in his stern attitude towards his new young family in general and his unwillingness to spend whatever money he had left – after my stepsisters had received the lion's share – in particular. Maman felt excluded from the best part in the lives of the only two men for whom she had really cared: her father and her husband. They had enjoyed life to the full with other women, and she had been left with the problems.

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My stepsister's birth and life seem to have been of great interest to others than Maman who also felt they had the right to scorn her for circumstances that did not affect them in any way. I don't know why that is. I remember her as particularly attractive and vivacious and always surrounded by a fan club. She laughed a lot and I am sure that she would have been the last one to dwell on the topic. If something displeased her,

Papa was there to put it right. He was the only man in whom she had a measure of trust and to whom she turned when she was in trouble. She refused to carve up a place in her life for any other male and, although she enjoyed having special admirers, a clear stipulation was agreed upon at the beginning of each of her relationships: the two parties led more or less separate lives, and never exchanged worries or sorrows. Only good times were worth sharing. Misery, her own or that of others, depressed her, and she wanted to avoid sadness at all costs. She had married briefly an Englishman when she was 16 but once married had refused to surrender her virginity in the normal way. Incensed, her husband had dragged her to a doctor, who failing to convince her that she should bare the pain for the greatest pleasure of her husband ended up relieving her surgically of the unwelcome hindrance. Three months later she took refuge in her father's house, claiming that her husband was beating her. A swift divorce followed, sweetened by the hefty sum Papa paid to the bewildered groom who had believed it was common practice to rough up Egyptian wives.

My stepsister was known to have had at least two torrid love affairs, the first ending tragically in death and the other in violence. She had decided never to go there again. She lived for good food, good wine, aged scotch and a great deal of pampering. Party poopers were unwelcome. Did her immense appetite for life irk less gifted revellers? Were her female friends jealous of her and thus bent on spreading rumours? I never found out, but I do recall that she was much talked about then. Even now, I meet older people who seem tickled to have known her in her heyday. She was spared the ill health that normally should have followed her excesses, however: she dropped dead while planning that evening's outing on the telephone.

When I was around 12, I was alerted quite directly to the intense curiosity that surrounded her: our dentist, Dr Rafael Lévy, had red hair and a peculiar sense of humour. He also liked to fondle little girls and was so consummately practiced at it that he left me wondering, every time, if I had not been dreaming. I was always overcome by a strange feeling when he grabbed me: mainly shame, but also fear at having caused a grownup to lose control in such a disgusting (and perhaps dangerous) manner. It was like opening a box of chocolates and finding them crawling with worms. In my book, adults were always supposed to be protective, cool and composed, the distributors of polite smiles and little presents. Dr Levy's facial transformations led me to believe that this was not always the case. It was a very unsettling thought: Did all men change in this way at certain moments? What about Papa? By the time the doctor ushered me out of the room, he had always recovered his composure completely, and I wondered over and over if the whole scene had not been the figment of a sick imagination – mine, to be precise.

Lévy spoke French with a heavy Yiddish accent and punctuated his sentences with obscene gestures. I unmistakably recognised in him traits that my family described as vulgar and low-class, but my mother was convinced that he was the best dentist in town and never suspected his paedophilic tendencies. All her friends trusted him, and sent their children to his clinic alone.

As a non-Egyptian Jew, he may have been aware that his days in Egypt were numbered. Perhaps he no longer cared about his reputation. The only other explanation was that he believed well-behaved children were foolish enough never to repeat the dirty words he

hissed in their ears while rubbing himself against their arms as he reached conspicuously for an instrument. One day, he decided to proceed further in his explorations and, as his eyes glazed over and he started panting, I was overcome by terror and roughly pushed him away, blurting that if he did not stop at once, I would have to tell my father. "Good idea," he snickered nastily, "and don't forget to tell him that I also know all about your older sister's secret." I left the clinic in a state of total confusion.

From that day on, I refused to go back to the dentist unless Maman accompanied me. I made her believe that when she was not around, he spent all the time of the consultation on the phone, then charged her for a job that he had not done. Not one who took kindly to being cheated of a few pounds, my mother duly came to watch over her investment.

Dr Lévy left Egypt five years later, following the events of 1956, expelled after the tripartite aggression. One morning, as Maman was going through the newspapers, she stopped and said: "Do you remember Rafael Lévy, the dentist? He has just been killed in a plane crash." I became hysterical at the news, and began to scream: "I killed him. I wished he would die, but I didn't mean it, not really, I didn't mean for him actually to actually be killed, and certainly not in such a horrible way." Maman was nonplussed. "Did anything happen between you?" She asked carefully, not wanting to believe it. For once my talent at fabulation deserted me and I just soberly recounted what he had done to me, and told Maman that he had hinted at some secret regarding my sister. She seemed surprised, but in our family we never spoke ill of the dead and Dr Lévy had just departed this world; so she only said that the late doctor must indeed have been alluding to the rumour that Papa had picked up with Laura where his older brother had left off, and that my sister was really my cousin, born out of wedlock and adopted by my father. "Someone once told me that your father had married her and adopted the baby to save your uncle's reputation. Mahmoud was an important public figure by then, but I doubt there is any truth to the story. Had she been a boy, of course it might have been different, but I don't believe your father would ever have considered adopting a girl. I remember how upset he was when you were born… Still, it would have been typical of his relationship with his family. They were always very close and very loyal to each other. I expect that if Mahmoud had ordered him to marry Laura he would have obeyed." Maman also added that Dr Lévy may have invented the story himself and circulated it to get back at my sister, who had always disliked him and excluded him from her circle of friends.

Later, we learned that the dentist had been seen in Rome in perfect health. Either the parents of one of his victims had leaked the false news, giving vent to their anger, or another Rafael Lévy was lying at the bottom of the ocean.

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I decided to forgive Rafael the Red, however. After all, this was not the only time I had seen grown men conduct themselves in unexpected ways with me. It had happened to me before and I had somehow come to suspect that I provoked males into acting in the strangest ways and that it was all my fault although I was at a loss to say exactly what it was I did wrong.

One day when I was nine or thereabouts, my mother took us to the Agricultural Museum. We had often played in the magnificent gardens, normally closed to the public, but which

we were allowed to enjoy courtesy of the then minister of agriculture, who was Father's friend. This time was special, however, for Mother had invited several little girls and their mothers to a private visit of the museum itself. We all trooped in and the children scattered around the vast halls, observing the displays. I lagged behind, trying to examine a dissected grasshopper through the lens of a microscope. One of the guards approached me and offered to adjust the device to my level. He stood behind me and, with one hand, swiftly pulled down my panties. Aghast at such an unexpected turn of events, I was howling the place down a second later, sobbing uncontrollably and telling all and sundry what had just happened. The man had disappeared. Maman was beside herself and ordered a search of the place. She kept asking if the man had hurt me and how exactly did he touch me. With his hand? With something else? I was scared and kept changing my story. She went to an office, dragging me with her, to phone my father. I was already sorry I had made a fuss because I suspected the whole affair was not about to blow over. When Father arrived, the feeling was confirmed. He took charge, cut the visit to the museum short, and sent all of us home.

At one point during the day, I must have been put to bed, because I was asleep when Father came into the room. He sat down next to me and patted me lightly – one of the very few physical demonstrations of affection I ever received from him. "You are a big girl," he said, "and I am sure that you will understand. They caught the man and they want you to come downstairs to tell them if he is the right one. You are sure he did not hurt you in anyway. If you say that you recognise him, he will go to jail. He is poor and has three children. Do you hate him enough to want him and his family to suffer? Think about it while you get dressed." I knew at once that I did not wish to harm anyone. Besides, the man had only pulled my panties down, and that had been done regularly to me when I was little and in a hurry to go to the loo. Maybe he just thought I wanted to go. "I am sorry I screamed so much," I told Papa. "That's all right, you were afraid," he replied. "It's not your fault. Now if they ask you if you have seen the man, you will just say you are not sure, you don't really know. That will be a white lie for a good cause."

Downstairs, all the lights were on, and the hall shone brightly, as it did when my parents were receiving important guests. Several men were standing in a row at the far end of the room. Only one was clad in dark blue overalls, like the ones worn by the museum guards. Two were policemen, I could tell from their uniforms. The others wore ordinary suits. "Can you recognise any of these men?" asked one of the suit-wearing men, pulling a notebook from a folder and a pencil from his breast pocket. He licked the pencil and I opened my mouth to tell him not to, because he would get lead poisoning; then I remembered why I was there. I looked at the men. In all honesty, I knew none of them. The man had approached me from behind and I had not seen his face. I therefore did not have to lie at all when I told them that I could recognise no one. I later found out that the man, who had been the subject of several other complaints, had nevertheless been sentenced to three years in prison, and that my father had looked after his family during that time. When he was released, Father found him another job. Child molesting was not a big deal in those days, and obviously, in certain cases, could even vastly improve the culprit's fortunes.

In the same spirit, when I complained that my Arabic teacher was exposing himself to me during lessons, Father advised me not to look and carry on reading as if nothing was happening. The teacher had a family to feed and probably suffered from a disorder. I

should learn to deal with such inconveniences without losing my nerve, he told me. Fortunately my mother was alarmed enough to decide to attend the lessons and her knitting needles clicked reassuringly while I perspired over Surat Al-Baqara. From then on, this particular teacher's trousers remained securely buttoned up.

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With the influx of Palestinian refugees, echoes of the conflict eventually reached our quiet Lycée. My school's contribution to the resettlement effort consisted in hiring Shaalan El-Husseini, a distant relative of the mufti of Palestine, as the Arabic teacher for the secondary school.

He was a large man, his face covered with unsightly warts. He never smiled or socialised with his colleagues and was as unpleasant as possible in class. For the first time we were told in no uncertain terms that there were differences between the students, based on nationality and religion. During his first week at the school, El-Husseini asked "the Jews" with foreign passports to leave the class. The others, those with Egyptian nationality, were to move to the back rows. Muslims were ordered to sit directly in front of him, while the rest (mainly French, Greeks and Armenians) could do as they pleased, provided they did not disturb the lesson. The teaching of Arabic had been stepped up from twice a week to a daily class, and we started every day with a bitter dose of El-Husseini.

By this time, I had become a model student, the youngest and best in my class. I had even gained a degree of popularity among my companions thanks to my willingness to let them copy my homework. They turned to me. "If you complain to the headmistress and tell her that he is treating us differently because we are Jewish and foreign, she will listen to you," they said. "Tell her that he only gives top marks to Muslims." I pointed out that I was a Muslim but got terrible marks with him; they retorted that I was "not a real one." Nor was I one to rat at school, especially not on my teachers. I knew instinctively that it was one thing to play this game at home, pitting Maman against Nenna or the servants, but another altogether to officially to accuse a person in authority of favoritism and transgressions against the school's much-vaunted ideal of tolerance. I therefore decided to stand up for my schoolmates personally.

One morning, I waited for a lull in El-Husseini's habitual oration, then, raising my hand, asked him why he was being so unfair to the Jewish students. He made me repeat the question twice. At first, I thought that I had used the wrong words but then I discovered that he had understood me perfectly the first time; he just wanted to marshal enough rage to produce the desired effect. His normally red face turned purple and his warts stood out in a decidedly darker hue. "You want to know why?" he hissed, coming so close to me that the rancid smell of the woolen vest he always wore under his shirt reached my nostrils. "This is why!" he mouthed, having apparently momentarily lost his voice. Opening his shirt collar, he showed us his throat: a large scar ran around it, tapering slightly on both sides of the neck. "This is what your friends the Jews did to me, young lady; this is why I hate them," he roared.

He then told us that he had been caught by a Zionist gang in Jerusalem and that they had slit his throat and left him for dead. His body was thrown into a shallow pit, where he landed on other corpses; soon, more victims were added to the heap. Then the Jews

fired into the mass grave to make absolutely sure that no one was left alive. El-Husseini was shot in the arm, but forced himself not to move until his attackers had gone. Later, he crept out, but had lost so much blood that he fainted on the road. It was a sheer miracle that he was rescued and was still alive today; and "no one, do you understand, no one, will speak in favour of Jews in front of me," he concluded, slamming his fist down on my desk. Total silence followed his outburst. We all pretended to be concentrating on the text before us so we could avoid meeting his eyes. Soon after, he dismissed the class.

The following day, he seemed more excited than usual. "You," he barked as soon as he had finished the roll call. He was pointing at me. I stood up as expected. "I made inquiries, I saw your file, I know who you are. I saw you in Cyprus. I did not recognise you at once, but now I remember. Your father is a decent man. Is it your foreign mother who turned you into a Jew-lover?" The class gasped. I was speechless. He waited to let the words sink in and then continued: "Let me tell you, class, about her mother." He kept staring at me. "Her mother is a foreigner. She has no country of her own and she is an infidel. She has no religion and no morals – like all foreign women. Do you know why her father chose her over a good Muslim woman?" Sure that no one was likely to supply him with an answer, he proceeded: "Because she does not mind doing things that are haram in bed… She does not refuse to take the dog position." Foaming at the mouth, he turned to the class and shouted: "You should have nothing to do with a girl whose parents sleep together like dogs." None of us had any idea what he was talking about, but I loved animals, especially dogs, and could not understand what was so wrong with behaving like them. Suddenly I began to giggle uncontrollably. The idea of my distinguished parents chasing each other on all fours, as I had often seen dogs do at the Club, was simply irresistible. I whispered to the girl next to me that I wondered if my father kept his tarboush on while crawling about. The class began to stir, tears running down the girls' cheeks with the effort of containing their laughter. I don't know if they had been visited by the same vision, had overheard me, or were simply amused by our teacher's histrionics. El-Husseini lost the last shreds of his self-control: "Get out of my class and never show me your face again," he hollered, shaking his fist at me. "I'll deal with you when I am finished here, and summon your father," he concluded with a flourish. That was more serious. Papa was certainly not going to enjoy a break in his routine, especially not one that entailed meeting this maniac. I had no doubt, moreover, that he would never take my side against a teacher. "Can't you call my mother instead?" I ventured, hoping against hope that he would consider the alternative. I had a better chance of putting my point across to her. He almost choked. "I don't talk to foreign women," he screamed hysterically, and, grabbing his ruler, proceeded to chase me from the classroom.

I made the cardinal mistake of recounting the incident to my mother, never grasping the ramifications that my little recital would have on my life. My mother complained at once to the headmistress, who called me in the following day to tell her the story "in my own words". Translating the bit about the dogs from Arabic to French without offending the delicate ears of such a very proper person was no easy matter. My euphemisms must have sounded rather garbled, leading her to believe that I had something to hide. When I had finished, she coldly informed me that I was a liar and had no place in her establishment. A disciplinary commission would convene to determine my fate. For the time being, I

was to go home, talk to no one from the school and await further developments. It was a terrible blow, but, just as I had always stood silently in front of my father, unable to defend myself when he accused me falsely, I was now incapable of uttering a single word. The daunting task of arguing my case seemed as impossible as climbing the Himalayas on roller skates.

That day marked my subsequent attitude when confronted with injustice. I either accept my assumed guilt and proceed as if my accusers are in the right, or turn my back on them and walk away. I am likely to take any of these courses indifferently, according to the mood of the moment, instead of basing my choice on any careful consideration of my best interests. I absolutely refuse to engage in fights to establish my innocence, intuiting that a victory under the circumstances could never be sweet. I resent too much being suspected of wrongdoing without proof, and forever despise my accusers.

A month after my expulsion, the headmistress summoned me again. I was to appear in front of the disciplinary commission the following week, she told me. I had a choice, though: I could stick to my version of the story, in which case I would definitely be expelled from all French state schools in Egypt and abroad, and would therefore have to look for a future in a religious or lay private establishment; or I could admit publicly that I had lied (not misunderstood), and present my humble excuses to the teacher and the commission for all the trouble I had caused. In that case I would be reinstated, albeit with restrictions: I would not be allowed to mix with the other students in the playground, and my name would be removed forever from the honour roll.

I imagined Maman taking me from school to school, all of them with a lesser reputation of excellence than the Lycée, and having to recount my story over and over again (by this time I had discovered at least some of its obscene implications). After a few minutes of reflection, I chose the latter course, which in the end would hurt no one but me. My parents objected that life would be hell, and that they had reason to believe the other students had been threatened with punishment if they even spoke to me on the phone, but I insisted that I would be able to handle it. As I walked out of the disciplinary council, having uttered the required apology, El-Husseini caught up with me: "I said it, and I am sure they do it," he whispered madly, "and I'll say it again. Let's see what you can do now." Somehow, I felt a certain satisfaction at his admission. I could now think of him as a worm, and not suffer a single pang of guilt.

The following months were quieter on the school front. I had made up my mind to keep entirely to myself and concentrate on my books. During those four years, I was shunned by my classmates but discovered Proust, who was a hundred times more interesting than any friends I could have wasted time with. Besides, unexpectedly grave problems had developed at home, and school events naturally moved to the periphery of my life.

ILLNESS

In the winter of 1950, when I, was just turning 12, my father fell seriously ill. Specialists in Egypt and Europe did not give him long to live: in those days, tuberculosis was terminal. We began to travel more often, spending long periods in Switzerland to be close to the centre of the most advanced research on the illness. We lived for months on end in a rented chalet in Arosa, a mountain station famous for the number of its sanatoriums and hospitals, where my father was confined. I found the place dismal. We were allowed to visit Papa once a week, but could only stand under his balcony, looking up at him. I kept thinking that this might be the last time I would see him.

We, on the other hand, had been ordered to stay in bed for long spells and large amounts of butter and cream were added to our diets to ward off the possibility of contamination. I was gaining weight by the day and began to feel extremely awkward about it. Life seemed to offer two possibilities: either tuberculosis like the feverish children that I often saw walking in groups in the village, accompanied by nurses, or terminal obesity. The distance between these two poles had suddenly shrunk to nothing. I began to read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* at this time, which did little to alleviate my mood. I missed the real meaning of the book, its irony, its political connotations, looking instead for descriptions of the disease and its consequences.

I took long walks in the forest alone, but stopped the practice when I discovered that almost every clearing harboured a sanatorium where the patients, many of them children my age, lay in rows of beds on the terrace. Instead, I went to sit on the shores of a secret lake, which I fancied I had discovered because I never saw anyone near it. It was a rather dreary expanse of murky water, greyish in colour and surrounded by white boulders. It belonged more to the moon than to an ordinary mountain landscape. I gazed for a long time at the glaciers above and imagined that a cataclysm had destroyed the world and left me the only survivor. I imagined that from then on, my life would be steeped in solitude and that I would never escape Arosa, although, when the doctors could no longer do anything for my father, we did eventually leave.

Back in Egypt, to avoid contagion, we children moved with Nenna first to the Mena House, then to a flat in Zamalek, and finally to the top floor of the villa (which my stepsisters had hastily vacated to make room for us), while Maman became a full-time nurse. At first, she had entertained ideas of keeping us in the Zamalek apartment while she contemplated the possibility of a separation from our father. I rather liked our new home, which was close to school and very similar to my classmates' dwellings. Maman stayed in Dokki all day long, but came back at night. After a while, I felt terribly sad thinking of Father alone and sick in the deserted house. We had left our dog at the villa and it broke my heart to imagine Father listening to his forlorn barking resounding through the empty rooms.

We had been ordered never to mention our father's disease. Although we had not been told its name, Maman implied that it was a shameful infirmity and that, if our friends found out, they would immediately stop talking to us. At first I believed that this was simply part of the rule of silence practised so diligently in our home, but then realised that it was more serious than that. There was too much whispering between

Maman and Nenna that stopped as soon as I was within earshot and too many tears in my mother eyes after long telephone conversations with doctors. I must have looked more dejected than usual during our stay in Zamalek, because my math teacher (my favourite that year) began to pay special attention to me. "I heard that your father is very ill," she said to me once, "what's wrong with him?" I was shaken. How did she know? And what could I tell her without betraying my mother's trust? She had made me promise not to tell anyone. I chose to burst into tears, partly because of the teacher's unusual interest in me and partly because I missed the days when we had been a happy family. I also felt twinges of guilt, believing that I was in some way responsible for Father's illness, for not having loved him enough. "Does your father have cancer?" the teacher, who was getting more than she had bargained for, asked compassionately. I did not know what cancer was, but had heard the word mentioned before. As I recalled, there was no shameful connotation attached to it. "I wish it were only that," I sobbed. "It is much, much worse." My teacher looked doubtful. "Nothing is worse than cancer," she informed me. I seemed to have lost points in the exchange and I wanted to regain my advantage. "It is a dirty disease," I whispered. My teacher recoiled. "You mean contagious?" she gasped, bewildered. No one had told me not to say it was contagious. Only the name of the complaint – which I did not know anyway – had to be concealed. I therefore nodded, hoping to provoke my teacher's further concern. "Leprosy?" she asked, horrified. "Did you hear that word mentioned?" I had, but not in connection with my father. "Much worse," I asserted. "It is something like bronchitis."


Father and Mother taking their afternoon walk in Flims

It must have dawned on her then that I was making things up, because she suddenly looked amused, instead of overcome, and told me not to worry: events sometimes looked bad, but had a tendency to come right in the end. She was sure my father would recover soon. All I had to do was work hard to make him happy. She must have talked to my

mother after what I told her, because they began sitting in our car after school, having long sotto voce conversations from which I was excluded.

In early May that year we returned to Switzerland for another spell in the mountains and when we came back we found out that the apartment had been flooded during our absence. Our furniture and Maman's personal belongings, including her fur coats, to which she was terribly attached, were completely ruined. We took temporary refuge at the Gezira Hotel, while my parents arranged for my stepsisters to vacate their upstairs apartment for us. I was overjoyed to move back to the house, although for a while we were only allowed to see Papa for a few minutes a week – on Sunday mornings, when we did not go to school.

My sisters rented two apartments around the corner from the house, but spent much time with Papa. Apparently grownups were less vulnerable to contamination than young children. If any hostility remained between them and Maman, it was put on the back burner while they joined forces to attend to the crisis at hand.

I read all the time during those days, the new books generously supplied by my mother, who did not want me to suspect that my father was about to die. She had problems of her own, which she carefully concealed from us: if my father died now, long before I had reached 21, she ran the risk of losing the three of us to my sisters – assuming, of course, that they wanted us. In the case of mixed marriages such as my parents', a Muslim member of the family can claim custody of blood-related minors on the grounds that their natural mother would not be able to instruct them in the Muslim faith. Islam, the state religion in Egypt, is transmitted through the Muslim spouse. A Muslim woman is forbidden by law to marry a non-Muslim or to convert to his religion. Should she choose someone outside her faith (a decision so frowned upon that relatively few venture on this path), he must convert to Islam in order to marry her. A Muslim man, on the other hand, can marry a Christian or a Jewish woman, and the couple can decide if the wife will convert to Islam or remain faithful to her own religion. In the latter case, she forfeits the legal rights of custody, alimony and inheritance, normally accorded to a Muslim wife. The children of such union are Muslim by law and must be given every chance to practice their faith. Maman had never considered conversion (despite Haniya wishes and my own attempts), but now she had a good reason to do so.

With the help of a Greek friend who had already gone through the legal procedure herself, Mother decided to convert secretly. For a long time, she did not tell Papa (or anyone else except Nenna), fearing that he would suspect her of having done so to secure a share in his legacy, and not just for the purpose of keeping us. Only much later, when he had completely recovered and was in perfect health, did she gather enough courage to confess. He did not seem to mind; in any case, the agrarian reform had deprived him of much of his fortune by then. If he had feared for his daughters' share, there was too little left to warrant protecting it.

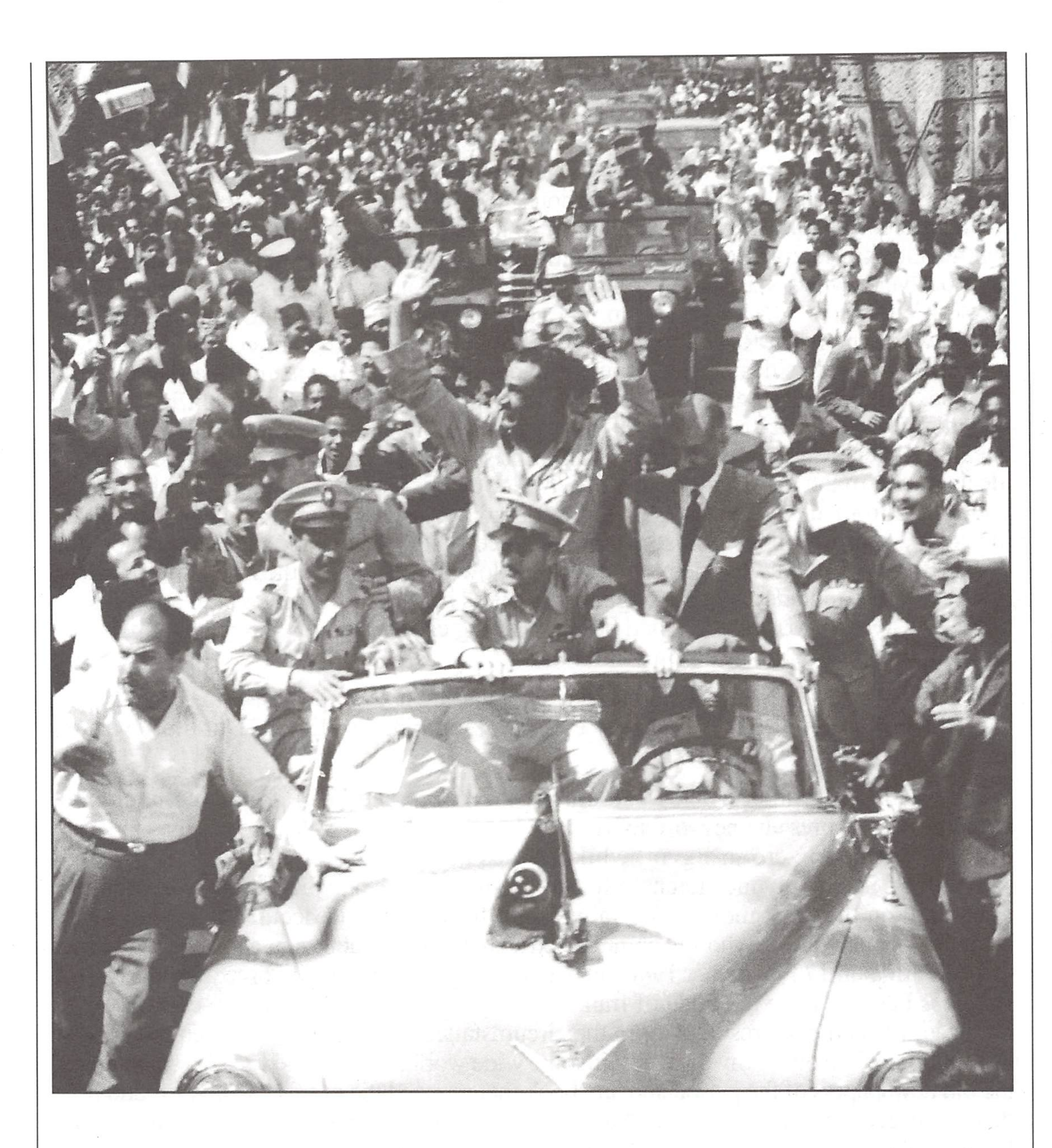
REVOLUTION

While we were worrying about Papa's health, the 1952 Revolution had taken place. It was not an earth-shattering event in our household. Haniya was not there to comment on the action for us, and we children had little interest in what happened outside home, school and the Gezira Club. My last political thought during that period dated from the previous year, when, standing in front of our gate to watch the king's motorcade passing through our street, I had seen a man in a galabiya spit on the ground in contemptuous hatred when the royal Rolls Royce whizzed by, unafraid of the police guards standing motionless on both sides of the avenue. The poor hated the king as much as Haniya had implied, I told myself then, and left it at that. I wonder now at the utter indifference with which my friends and I regarded the events that were beginning to shake the country. A decade earlier, people our age had gone to prison and been tortured for their political ideals. Later, in the 1970s, there was a revival of enthusiasm and, though less effectively, youngsters from all walks of life were stirred into activism once again. In between, under the Nasser regime, opposition seems to have been ruthlessly stamped out; yet even this does not fully explain why members of the landowning class and the liberal professions, my own father included, chose to ignore the signs heralding their downfall and took no protective action. Possibly they had been the ruling class for so long they never believed in the imminent loss of their status and wealth.

In fact, we were in Switzerland on 23 July, awaiting a new specialist's verdict, which was much more vital for us than any events taking place in Egypt. But there was no escaping what had taken place.

The war in Palestine, which I had almost forgotten, had been protracted, including numerous cease-fires and new offensives, and lasting well into 1949. The king's popularity had plummeted to zero in Egypt, while he was accused overseas of harbouring Nazi sympathies. Seemingly indifferent to his fall from grace, he had picked that very moment to embark on the most momentous faux pas of his career, and decided to get rid of his beautiful, popular queen, who still commanded a great deal of public adulation. He repudiated Queen Farida on 17 November 1948, an event coinciding with the divorce of his sister, the Empress Fawzia, from the Shah of Iran. Although at the time the whole mess went over my head, I became interested later in the circumstances that all but destroyed our way of life and forced me out of my cozy nest into the wide world. For a while I read systematically the old newspapers of the period and any book that retraced the events. At first I found little that made any sense to me but after Nasser's death more information became available and I managed to piece the recent past together.

Those who have tried to make sense of King Farouk's life have always stopped in astonishment at his rapid loss of standing. Only 28, he was no longer the beloved golden prince of his subjects' dreams. Bald and shortsighted, almost obese, Farouk looked middle aged. Furthermore he had a foul reputation. When his project to replace Farida became public, his popularity sank even further, if that was possible. The girl he had selected, Nariman Sadek, a 16-year-old in great need of a diet and whose mother's reputation was already rather tarnished, did nothing to enhance Farouk's image. It was whispered that her encounter with the decaying king had been engineered by her mother's lover, and the



palace's favourite jeweller. Farouk had been advised to marry an ordinary girl to please his people, and Nariman was as ordinary as they came. But the people had no wish to be ruled by a nonentity. She was thus perceived as an insult rather than an attempt to please them. Many Egyptians had admired Farida as an idol and were not impressed at all with the idea of their next-door-neighbour taking her place. But the discontent, deep as it was, still did not constitute serious opposition. Despite his many enemies and his fresh military disasters, Farouk represented the law of the land nevertheless. He was the king, and when Nariman presented him with a boy, an heir to the throne, he believed that he had now firmly established his dynasty.

He was wrong. Indignation had been rising against the continued British occupation of the Canal Zone. The people no longer wanted promises. Prime Minister Mustafa El-Nahhas broke off negotiations with the British and abrogated the 1936 Treaty unilaterally on 8 October 1951. The Sudan seemed lost, and Egypt's sterling balance was blocked. Things did not look good. As for the Palestinian question, it was obvious that it had reached a stalemate, leaving the combatants to their own devices. The people had no recourse but to turn their backs on the king, the government and party leaders, no longer expecting any magical solution from them.

The resistance began to form organised groups. Young Egyptians trained as fida'iyin (commandos) went out to become martyrs to the cause, since all else seemed to have failed. With the news of the daily fighting in the Canal Zone, where the British were entrenched and intent on annihilating Egyptian opposition, popular fury mounted. The last straw was the British attempt on 25 January to occupy the Ismailia barracks and turn out the Buluk Nizam, an auxiliary police force that occupied it.

A fierce battle ensued in which 50 Egyptians were killed. Their funerals, and the numerous incidents that followed, brought armed young men out into the streets. Schoolboys took over their school buildings, from which they had to be evicted by the police. Resentment of the government, accused of provoking violent incidents in order to use them as a pretext for repression, whetted the people's zeal.

On the morning of 26 January 1952, the Buluk Nizam from the Abbasiya barracks demanded weapons to come to the aid of their comrades in Ismailia. They marched unimpeded through the city and were joined by a procession of university students. They spread through and around Cairo's centre, without being stopped. No bridge was lifted to prevent their passage; if the police acted at all, it was unnoticeable. Word of what was happening circulated however and soon, worried parents showed at the school demanding to collect their children.

For a while, the demonstration was patriotic and fairly peaceful; then suddenly, with no known reason and thus creating the biggest unsolved mystery of the century, a huge mob poured into the city's wealthier districts and methodically began setting fire to every establishment that suggested any degree of luxury, or looked like a foreigner owned it. By two o'clock in the afternoon, it became clear that the rioters were targetting only the foreigners and the rich. "We will put paid to all the pashas," the crowd chanted. Maman remembers an Englishman on the terrace of the Turf Club, the bastion of Britishness, screaming for help while the crowd jeered below. Flames engulfed Shepheard's Hotel, the department stores, Barclay's Bank, the Turf and Victoria Clubs, the downtown cinemas as well as Badia's casino. Many of the establishments that were destroyed by the fire were among the favourite haunts of the king and the British. Had the crowd acted spontaneously? Had anyone put them up to visiting destruction on their beloved city? And if so then who?

Anxious rumours began to circulate. It was said that Prime Minister Mustafa El-Nahhas was having a pedicure while Cairo burnt. Upon hearing the news, he had ordered an armoured military car to collect his wife from the hairdresser's salon and bring her home. At the same time, Fouad Serageddin, then minister of the interior, was closing a land deal in foreign currency. As for the king, he had been holding a banquet for dignitaries and high police officers in honour of his son's birth.

After the Cairo Fire, fingers pointed in different directions. There had been too many victims, innocent citizens, most of whom were unaware even of what had caused the disaster. The crowd had gone berserk and the police and fire brigade had stood by, watching. It was only in the late afternoon that the army took action and restored order; there were several casualties among the foreign communities, and the fire had devoured over 700 buildings and shops.

The press soon spread the word about Serageddin's inaction, and it was whispered that similar incidents had been about to break out in Port Said and Alexandria but were averted by firm and timely measures. Why, then, had the rioters in Cairo not been stopped before they went on a rampage? Who exactly was behind the uprising? These questions had to be answered. Furthermore, the rumours regarding the king's behaviour were not likely to restore anyone's confidence. In one of the stories circulating at the time, the rioters had rushed to Abdin Palace, where he was entertaining his guests, with shouts of Long Live the King. When Farouk appeared on the balcony, the slogans changed to: "Where is your mother?" The crowd was alluding to Queen Nazli's trip to the US in company of her paramour. Since King Fouad's death, the queen had not been on her best behaviour, and had initiated an affair with a Copt, a choice frowned upon much more than her dalliances with Farouk's former chief tutor, Ahmed Mohamed Hassanein, who at least was a Muslim. The mystery surrounding the accidental death of the Druze diva Asmahan in 1944 suddenly resurfaced too, a clear indication that the king's prestige among his people was at an all-time low. Asmahan had competed with Nazli for Hassanein's attention. She had also been suspected of working as a double agent, with the king's blessings. Could the singer's demise have been a crime passionel, rather than the liquidation of a spy?

The crowd, moreover, did not leave it at that: "How many teeth does your son have?" they shouted. Many anecdotes making the rounds in coffee shops involved Nariman's Italian sojourn; officially, the king had sent his fiancée off with several tutors to "finish" her education, in preparation for her new role. In fact, said the rumourmongers, he had sent her there for a test: if she presented him with a boy, she would become his queen; if she only produced a girl, he would have paid her off and tried again with someone new. Now that he was seeking "ordinary" girls, the possibilities were endless.

Faced with the slurs, the king had the gates of the palace shut and ordered his guards to fire on the rioters. He was seen watching the slaughter, then saluting before he returned indoors to his guests. To add more colour to the story, it was also said that the king had ordered the firing to continue beyond the precinct of the palace, covering all Abdin Square with dead demonstrators.

Others, however, rose in defense of the monarch: they claimed to have been eyewitnesses to the events and wanted to impose their own version. The king had been acclaimed, then insulted, by the mob, they said; but while he was standing on the balcony, some lunatics had entered the palace and threatened him from behind. He had therefore had no choice but to give the murderous orders that had been dictated to him.

In the end, no one ever found out who did what or why. It was a moment of insanity, and Cairene wanted to forget about it – if they could, for the damage to the city stood as a constant reminder of the day the people went mad. For a while, revellers preferred to entertain within the walls of their homes.

The incidents accompanying the resistance in the Canal Zone and the Cairo Fire apparently convinced my family that something was very wrong with the way the king was running the country. They seemed to have given up on him and expected his reign to end. My grandmother considered that the murder of foreigners and the destruction of architectural treasures were signs of terminal backwardness, a clear indication that Egyptians had been prompt to shed their thin veneer of culture and run back to the jungle at the first opportunity. She had been particularly saddened by the ruin of the beautiful downtown buildings especially the elegant hotels where she had briefly paraded as a beautiful and mysterious stranger, while for some unknown reason my mother mourned the destruction of Cinema Rivoli in particular. For a time, they wondered why the perpetrators had not been caught and brought to justice. They ventured guesses, but refused to believe that the king had anything to do with it. Both were royalists at heart.

Other than that, I think my family took Mohamed Naguib's arrival on the scene with a measure of equanimity. Since things could not get much worse, they could only improve. Even my father, on his sickbed, rejoiced.

At first, from outside the country, the Revolution had looked like a military coup that would not be allowed to come to fruition. Too much was at stake for the British in Egypt to let the country slip from their grasp. They knew how to deal with the king, and party politics was their game. Soon the monarchy would be restored and the army returned to its barracks.

The agrarian reform that followed a few months later was more serious food for thought. The large landowners considered themselves the backbone of the country, the force that dominated its agriculture and therefore its wealth. The peasants depended on them for a livelihood. Although revisionist historians have often depicted them as monsters, at the time, they saw themselves as benevolent despots using an iron fist only to keep their subjects in line. If the fellahin owned the land, they would not know what to do with it, was the general consensus among the proprietors; consequently, few resisted their despoliation, convinced that the land would be returned to them as soon as the experiment failed. My father did not seem to mind either. He considered managing his land more trouble than it was worth and did not even make arrangements to keep the bulk of it by splitting his feddans among members of his family. Notwithstanding the trials aimed at ridding Egypt of its ruling class, it is only after the officers consolidated their grip on the country by successfully quelling the March 1954 uprising against their emerging hegemony that the truth began to sink in. With the ousting of Mohamed Naguib and Gamal Abdel-Nasser's appearance on the scene, it became clear that Egypt had embarked on a new course. Attempts at liberalisation and democracy were no longer on the agenda; we were clearly heading toward the reign of terror.

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Abdel-Nasser and the new regime were the furthest thing on my mother's mind at that particular moment. Had she been told that the devil had taken over the country, it would have left her equally cold. Exhausted by my father's long illness she had suddenly rebelled. All her efforts were not going to come to naught. She had decided that, despite the most authoritative medical opinions, my father was not going to die – not if she was given half a chance to save him. She kept visiting doctors, pestering them for the latest cures and

experimenting with various health-enhancing foods. She categorically refused to contemplate anything short of a miracle. During one of her numerous chats with a specialist who probably tolerated her nagging because she was very beautiful and my father still influential (one never knew then who was in favour and who was not, and my father's name had not appeared in the newspapers among the offenders of the people), he mentioned that he was experimenting with a new drug on the patients of Qasr El-Aini, the government hospital. The results were encouraging, but he had not yet received permission to use the drug commercially. My mother demanded at once that the new treatment by applied on my father. The doctor pointed to a large jar on his desk. "I cannot use it on your husband, because I just told you it is forbidden to administer it before the tests are conclusive. All I can tell you is that my patients are doing well on six tablets a day." He then excused himself and disappeared for a few minutes – long enough for my mother to transfer half of the contents of the jar into her handbag. If the doctor noticed the larceny when he returned, he did not let on. With an admirable courage born from despair, my mother began to treat my father without telling anyone. Critical of her most trivial decisions, he completely trusted her with his health. She only confessed at the following checkup, when the doctors expressed utter surprise at the seemingly miraculous healing of my father's lungs. The drug was commercialised a few months later and became instrumental in eradicating tuberculosis.



Karim and Farida at the San Stefano in Alexandria

In the summer of 1954, I passed my first-year baccalaureate at the Lycée. My teachers generally felt I should continue to study mathematics, but my father, his health much improved, suddenly and adamantly refused to let me sit my last round of final exams in the same establishment. The Lycée had not stood behind me in time of need, and no longer deserved me, he asserted more than five years after the fact. I discovered then that he had not taken the El-Husseini incident in his stride, as I had imagined; he had discussed it at length, albeit in vain, with the school's administration. Furthermore, not only my family, but also the headmistress and the teachers had believed every word I had said, but found that their hands were tied. Protected by his refugee status, El-Husseini could have lodged a complaint with the Ministry of Education and caused endless trouble to the establishment had he not received entire satisfaction. I had simply been sacrificed to higher interests. My father had been proud that I had decided to stay and face my tormentor at the time, but now the affront had to be acknowledged and it was time to put things right. It was therefore decided that I should enrol in a private school for my last year. I was unhappy about this decision at first, but the thought that I would no longer have to face El-Husseini weighed in favour of the private institution. I would make up for the scantiness of their credentials with hard work.

The Cours Morin, however, was an eye-opener as to how pleasant school could be. It was run by an old French couple more interested in the fees important personalities could pay (in return for preferential treatment for their children) than in academic achievement; and it provided the best educational services money could buy. The classes were small: twelve students at most. There were no uniforms and discipline was enforced only perfunctorily. The teachers, mostly men, were among the most creative who had ever come to Egypt, because they were allowed a measure of freedom with the curriculum. Students were treated as individuals, not as a group to be molded firmly into a homogeneous mass. It was one of the happiest and most mentally productive years of my life. Our philosophy teacher was rumoured to be a communist, but he never attempted to proselityse at the school. I only discovered his real dealings later, when he suddenly disappeared before the end of the year. He had left the spoiled little girls that we were alone, but had been very active at Cairo University. By the spring of 1955, several students had been arrested, tried and condemned. A classmate's cousin was in that group. She also feared for her fiancé, who had gone into hiding. Instead of poring over our books to prepare for our finals, we became interested for the first time in the Egyptian Left and the political prisoners' fate. Few could answer our questions. At that very moment, our teacher took off without so much as a good-bye, leaving behind a trail of compromising documents that had to be retrieved and disposed of before suspicion fell on our school. I began to wonder about communism. I had admired my teacher and regretted that I had not met him before. He was genuinely interested in enlarging his students' horizons and we were encouraged to think for ourselves rather than memorise. Under his supervision, I had discovered that I had opinions; in the school's open atmosphere, I easily found the words to express them. More confident, I mixed with the other girls, and was surprised that they too came from unconventional backgrounds. Among them, I was not an object of curiosity. I became less self-centered and more interested in the people around me. They no longer represented a block of enemies: these were potential friends. I wondered if our teacher's skills had anything to do with his political beliefs.

In all other respects, however, young people from highly cultured families, who could have been called upon to lead the country one day, were shockingly divorced from the political situation, even when so much was at stake in the Middle East. Gamal Abdel-Nasser had replaced Mohamed Naguib without making a ripple in our sheltered lives – unless, of course, a member of the family had been arrested and accused of being a monarchist, a communist or, worst of all, a Muslim Brother. The families of many of our close friends had been sequestrated, too, and deprived of all their worldly possessions. We knew that some of the richest families barely had enough to eat and had to resort to shameful practices in order to survive. Since the authorities had performed full inventories of their belongings, which were then "entrusted" to the owners, many smuggled priceless objects out of their homes at night to sell them, before replacing them with cheap copies. A number of flourishing businesses sprang up suddenly, specialising in the commerce of such artifacts. We were lucky to have escaped similar treatment, although my sister used to point at some objects in our house, murmuring that she would not have minded relinquishing them to the revolution.

I found the new leader's voice grating and his speeches grandiloquent and embarrassing. From conversations I had picked up as well as from personal observations, I had formed a rather poor opinion of my compatriots in general: I wholeheartedly subscribed to the idea that *le peuple* were lazy and inclined to bungle whatever job they had been entrusted with. I thought it was counterproductive to pretend that things were otherwise. Why imbue them with pride in their shortcomings?

Even more telling of my lack of political wisdom, I had forgotten that we were under partial British occupation and that the Revolution's primary aim had been to rid the country not only of the king but of the British army still lingering in the Canal Zone. Haniya invectives against the colonial masters were a thing of the past; I was under the impression that they had disappeared with her. Two of my stepsisters had been married to Egyptians for a while, and the third had settled permanently in England. Their officer boyfriends had vanished. At the Cours Morin, France's colonies figured much more prominently in our discussions than the situation at home; the Suez Canal could have been situated in the Canary Islands for all the attention we gave it. Egyptian history was not included on the curriculum, and we felt totally unconcerned with its fate. Arguing for or against Algeria's independence took up much more of our time.

Some of the girls at school had implied at one time that Farouk was about to come back and I rejoiced for them because I knew that their families had been forced to give up their palaces and their belongings and were now living in more modest apartments in Zamalek. After a while however they completely stopped referring to the king, or even mentioning that they had grown up in palaces.

While we were minding our own business, the March crisis – involving the only serious rebellion against the Free Officers – had come to pass and, unbeknownst to us, the noose had begun to tighten uncomfortably around the neck of those representing the old regime. The intelligence service, originally trained by the CIA, was already adopting KGB-style measures, although it was not yet hauling in ordinary citizens for imaginary slights against the regime; it was slowly getting there, however, positioning its spies among the unsuspecting. Our friends stopped talking openly about anything of consequence in public and visitors never arrived in their cars, for fear secret agents would notice their numbers.

Telephone conversations took place in code. Acquaintances disappeared overnight and it was whispered that they were being tortured. If and when they reappeared, they would not say where they had been for fear of being caught again. Those who still had money concealed it carefully while trying to find ways to get it out of the country. Many people acquired false papers and fled, carrying whatever they could with them; then we began to hear that people were being strip-searched at the borders. Now friends left without even saying goodbye. The reign of terror had begun.

At the time, I saw nothing. I felt completely secure in my little world, protected by Papa from all outside unpleasantness. I believed that all I had to do was grow up and take my place in the normal order of things. I saw little around me that belied that impression, except maybe that part of the golf course at the Gezira Club, which was commandeered to accommodate a youth club. I made a mental note that they had ruined the imported grass in less than a week. Other than that, the new order seemed to have no direct impact on my life. I was busy building something new: for the first time I had a best friend.

It was difficult to imagine someone as unlike me as Wilma. She was as skinny as I was hefty, as dark as I was fair, as insolent as I was outwardly respectful. She did not care about her grades and never bothered with homework. She was bright enough to get by, and her scathing sense of humour always helped her out of the stickiest situations. I would have given an arm and a leg to be like her. That she had already experimented with sex and was quite open about it gave her a very special aura. I kept this last bit of information from my mother, knowing that if she found out, she would forbid me ever to speak to her. Instead, I profusely described Wilma's home, her Italian mother and Lebanese father, and her numerous relatives, who lived in the same building. I invented all sorts of details that I suspected would dispose my mother favourably toward my new friend. It worked, and for the following years I was allowed to enjoy Wilma's company without parental interference. In June 1955, our baccalaureate in hand, we left the Cours Morin with no particular projects for the future, except that of enjoying our holidays to the full.

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Meanwhile, I was developing in what I considered an unpleasant character exhibiting continuous bad temper when I was with my parents. Overweight, bespectacled and generally awkward, I blamed them for having made me "different" not "better" than others as they claimed. I often caught my mother worried look as she watched my hairy legs and my cumbersome breasts. Even when I finally improved physically I knew I was not her favourite child. In fact, I was the worst, always forgetting to be considerate of her demands. Many stories have become part of our family collection of fables, and prove her point beyond discussion. Once, I came home from school to find the whole family in upheaval. Maman was suffering from violent abdominal pains and my grandmother was crying silently on her sofa, while Papa worked the phone. Soon a doctor arrived, who, after examining my mother, declared that she had renal colic. Not dangerous at all, he said, but quite painful. He asked us to find a particular painkiller, which, due to the shortage of medical supplies in revolutionary Egypt, was very difficult to obtain. Eventually we got hold of the precious vials and of a male nurse capable of injecting their content properly. Half an hour later, our mother was resting peacefully. Believing that the danger had passed, I hurried to the Gezira Club, where my friends

were waiting for me. I was having a grand time when I was suddenly grabbed by the collar of my pretty new shirt (it was the first time I wore it, and I was revelling in the compliments I was receiving) and yanked unceremoniously to my feet. I was confronted with Father's furious face. "Your mother almost died a few hours ago, and you are at the club having fun?" he growled. Maman was standing behind him, apparently unscathed by her ordeal, and I attempted to make light of the accusation: "She seems in perfect condition to me," I parried, "and she was fast asleep when I left. Was I expected to stay to shoo the flies?" From that day on, "shooing the flies" became a family slogan, brandished whenever I was perceived to be acting selfishly.

A more serious incident occurred when I was around seventeen, as we were returning from our European holidays on a ship, whose stabilisers were not all that they should have been. These were pre-Dramamine times, and Maman and my siblings stayed in the cabin, suffering violent bouts of seasickness. I, on the other hand, was not affected. Furthermore, I had met an interesting Kuwaiti on board, who was returning to his country after obtaining his PhD in England. Taking advantage of Maman's temporary indisposition, I joined him and a group of young people at the bar. From what I was told later, Maman, discovering my absence from the cabin, had formed an impromptu search party of two which included my sister and herself, and begun to comb the ship for me. Always suspecting the worst, she headed for the upper deck, where, she imagined, I was hiding with my new beau, doing awful things like kissing him, or plotting to run away with him to his desert kingdom. To her surprise, she did not find me there, but the rolling of the boat suddenly increased and, unable to stand, she sat down on a chair, which, with a violent jerk of the ship, promptly skidded with her to the other end of the deck. My sister, holding on to a pole, tried to intercept her on her way back, but missed. The chair and its occupant went on sliding from side to side until, in a desperate attempt to free herself from this improvised roller coaster, Maman tumbled off and was hurled against the banister, injuring herself. By this time, attendants alerted by my sister's screams had appeared on deck and they helped my mother to her cabin. Here again, Papa used his famous grip to haul me out of the pleasant gathering, telling me what he thought of my conduct in front of my embarrassed friends. I was confined to the cabin until we reached Alexandria. Needless to say, I never heard from the Kuwaiti again. This particular incident was recorded by Maman as "the day you broke my ribs."

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On the summer of 1955, we went to Austria because of financial restrictions on travellers. Austria was then among the cheapest European countries. My mother soon became disenchanted with the amenities available at the hotel, which were woefully inadequate when compared with the Swiss establishments we had frequented. I did not care. A day after our arrival, I had met Marco and he had shown a clear interest in me. He suffered from a severe case of acne, but I forgave him this little deficiency wholeheartedly. That a boy had looked at me with any degree of sympathy was a miracle in itself. Even the most impartial observer would have had to confess that I was not the fluffy kind of girl who attracted boys at once. Nor was I a tomboy, an alternative that, judging from Wilma's successes, was also very popular.

In those days of frugal consumption, I had only one pair of shoes, sturdy half boots appropriate for hiking, with thick rubber soles. Two skirts, both dark blue, two shirts,

both white, and a pullover formed the rest of my wardrobe. None of these items did much for me. On the contrary, they seemed to augment rather than camouflage my rather overdeveloped shape. Marco did not appear to notice. We went on long walks and he told me about his life in Rome, where he was studying to become a lawyer. He had saved enough to come on a package tour to Austria and would be leaving at the end of the week. On his last day, he took me dancing. My whole family traipsed after me to the dancing hall, but even that did not send him running for cover. He was happy to meet them, he said; he even chatted in Italian with my father. He invited me to dance, although I warned him that I had never tried it before. I wanted to tell him that I was naturally clumsy but could not remember the Italian word, so I left that part out. As he guided my first steps, I could distinctly hear the soles of my shoes making a loud, sucking noise on the polished floor. Marco did not laugh when he heard it. He just squeezed my shoulder to let me know that it did not matter. I fell madly in love with him at that precise moment and, while trying to relax and follow the rhythm as instructed, I imagined myself living in Rome with him in marital bliss. The next morning he came to say good-bye and kissed me shyly on the lips. I was beside myself and swore to wait for him forever. As soon as the bus he had boarded disappeared at the corner, I began to write my first love letter. I vowed to learn Italian better and lose weight to surprise him when we met again, which he had told me would be very soon. Next I wrote to Wilma to let her know that I had graduated to kissing boys.

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Upon our return, I naturally chose to enrol in law school, not so much to follow in my father's footsteps as to be able to write to Marco that I too would be a lawyer some day. Wilma followed suit. Neither of us was particularly taken by the subject, but what else could we do? Had we stayed at home, parental control would have tightened further, and we wanted to be free. The French School of Law in Munira was the perfect option. There was no supervision whatsoever; one could attend classes if one wanted to, but it was by no means mandatory. Many of the students had full-time jobs already and came to afternoon classes in order to improve their positions. Only those who felt ready to take the end-of-year exam had to pay the fees, which were nominal anyway. This state of affairs went a long way toward loosening parental shackles and we intended to take full advantage of the situation. We went to the movies and for drinks with the boys. I learned to lie without blushing. I was growing up. Even my mother noticed and decided that it was time for me to undo my braids and lose my white socks. She bought me my first pair of high heels and took me to the hairdresser, who straightened my hair and showed me how to hold it up with little mother-of-pearl combs and pins, like my mother. In time, he developed an elaborate chignon that made me look taller and consequently less bulky. I no longer stuck my tongue out every time I caught sight of myself in the mirror. Despite all the excitement, I passed my exams easily at the end of the year.

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The summer holidays took us back to Switzerland (Austria, to my mother's relief was never revisited) in the early summer of 1956. With free time on my hands, I had perfected my game of golf and could now take part in championships in the charming resort of Lenzerhide, which boasted an international 18-hole course. Youngsters had not yet taken

up the sport, traditionally reserved to the elderly, and I was quite a sensation. I could outplay all the women and was often asked to partner with the men in foursomes. I discovered the charms of older men and, although I had acquired a regular boyfriend my age, the hotel owners' son, I reveled in my golf partners' compliments. Among them, though, was a handsome man in his mid-forties who became quite serious. He was waiting for his appointment as Swiss ambassador to Argentina and asked me to marry him. That was a bit more than I had contemplated, but I was flattered nonetheless. I was rather embarrassed too. I could not bring upon myself to call him by his name, Walter, and kept addressing him as "Monsieur". I was aware of the absurdity of the situation, not least because he was mistaken for my father wherever we went. How would Papa react when I asked for his permission to marry Monsieur?



The author at the age of eighteen

I lay in bed night after night, wondering if I really wanted to marry him and travel with him to Argentina. Then Beat, my boyfriend would whistle our signal under my window and it was time to creep out of my room to join him on his drinking forays. Beat could consume inordinate amounts of wine and spirits without showing any sign of having been affected by his excesses in the least. He was on a short furlough before rejoining his unit and completing his military service. Returning to the hotel in the wee hours of the morning, Beat would stop the car, look at me and ask me if I had made up my mind to marry him when he finished with the army. He was going to help his parents with the hotel. The winter season in Lenzerhide was terribly boring, but he would have to stick around, at first at least, to oversee the yearly repairs to the buildings. He needed a wife and many children to make the long months bearable. In theory at least, I did not mind reviving my Heidi dreams, rather frustrated in Cyprus because it lacked snow, indispensable to any credible rendition of the little mountain girl's life. Beat, however, suffered from latent BO, which developed to its full potential whenever he drank. If I had "smelled" as a young girl, he positively reeked. I could find no excuse, since I experienced the excellence of the hotel plumbing system first-hand every day. I tried several answers in my head to counter his insistence. They ran the gamut between "I might, when you send your suit to the cleaners," to the more direct "you must be joking, have you smelled your armpits lately?" In the end, I married neither.

One morning in late July, I was awakened by a brawl under my window. In this quiet, proper little pink and white village, surrounded by picturesque mountains and deep green lakes, it

was as surprising as if I had suddenly heard a street vendor yelling "batata helwa" at the top of his voice. I scrambled out of bed and, opening my shutters, was treated to the spectacle of my young brother involved in a shouting match with an elderly couple. Wasting no time, I ran downstairs in my pyjamas. There was no crowd surrounding the trio. If people were observing them, they were doing so from behind drawn curtains.

"What is going on?" I asked Karim. He was such a sweet boy that I never doubted his innocence, no matter what the cause of the conflict could have been. "They say I stole their canal," said my puzzled sibling, his voice quavering between tears and laughter. I stared at the man fiercely. The woman, I had decided, did not count; she was trying ineffectually to calm her husband, repeating that his blood pressure would soar if he did not stop yelling. I stared contemptuously at the fat little man. "What exactly did you say he stole from you?" I asked him icily. He turned his attention to me momentarily and I could feel his eyes straying from my face toward my incongruous outfit, or whatever was showing under the pyjamas. "Are you Egyptian too?" he asked in an apparent non sequitur. "Never mind what I am, I asked you a question," I interjected, proud to be sounding like a professional interrogator. "You too are a thief," the man shouted, suddenly remembering. "You stole our canal, we built it, it is ours, you had no right to steal it."

Understanding nothing (news from Egypt had not been filtering into our retreat and, if my parents knew something, they had not seen fit to share it with us), I informed the man that he was suffering from senile dementia and should seek professional help. This must have infuriated him inordinately, because he began spitting at us. Losing my cool, I slapped him, then gasped when he crumbled to the ground. "Oh my God, I've killed him," I breathed and, as I bent over to help him, my head and his wife's collided. She sat down hard next to her husband. Her hat fell to the ground and was instantly carried away by the wind. At this point the hotel owner and his wife decided to intervene before irreparable damage was done, disgracing their hotel for seasons to come. We were asked politely to go inside while the old couple was helped to their feet. Even the runaway hat was retrieved. My parents, whose rooms faced the hotel garden, had remained unaware of what had happened. My brother and I, guessing quite correctly that further repercussions were imminent, decided that we should present them with a milder version of events.

"Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal yesterday," Papa said by way of explanation. "It seems Egyptians are no longer welcome in Europe. We had better book our passage and return home as fast as we can. We do not want to be stuck here when war breaks out." My mother did not believe that it would come to that, but made inquiries about ship schedules and we secured cabins on the almost fully booked Esperia, sailing 15 days later from Genoa. The hotel manager came to speak to my parents. In brief, he hinted that our prompt departure would be appreciated in view of the complaints lodged against us by the other guests. Now would be a good time to depart. Obviously the Swiss did not look kindly upon the nationalisation of the Suez Canal; Nasser had just blown my chances of becoming an ambassador's wife in Argentina or, less spectacularly, the wife of a hotel owner in Lenzerhide.

In the following days, I found out more. Negotiations with the US over an arms deal had soured, and Nasser had turned to the Czechs; in protest, the World Bank and the

British had withdrawn their offers to finance the High Dam. On 26 July 1956, the fourth anniversary of Farouk's exile, Nasser appeared in Manshiya, the Alexandria neighbourhood where 20 months earlier he had escaped an assassination attempt. He made a lengthy speech in Mohamed Ali Square, berating the British in particular and the Western powers in general, then said: "I started to look at Mr Black [the then president of the World Bank] and I saw him in my imagination as Ferdinand de Lesseps." De Lesseps was the code word for the Egyptians to begin taking over all the buildings of the Suez Canal Company. Mahmoud Younis, a brilliant young engineer, had been put in charge of the operation, and acquitted himself of the task masterfully. Within a few hours the Canal had been transferred into Egyptian hands.

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We spent the remaining two weeks before our departure between Arenzano, an ancient little fishermen village with cobbled streets a great deal of character near Genoa where the food gained my parents' total approval, and Alassio, an Italian beach resort popular for its extraordinary charm, a toy town nestled between sea and pine-clad hills. My sister and I were very popular with Italian boys.

One evening in Arenzano, as we were leaving the cinema, Farida and I stood at the curb, waiting to cross the highway to reach our hotel. Quite shortsighted, I always took a long time staring left and right to make sure there were no cars on the horizon. My sister tugged at my hand impatiently and, seeing that I was not moving, pulled away and began to run across the thoroughfare. I stood there, paralysed. I had seen a dim light hurrying towards her, but only found my voice when the car was upon her, brakes shrieking. She disappeared under the vehicle, which I involuntarily noted was a sports car, and for a moment that seemed like an eternity, all was silent. I did not want to think; the accident was too enormous for me even to form the words that would seal its reality. I just stood mesmerised on the curb, clinging to the belief that as long as I remained stuck to my spot, I could deny what had just happened. Once I moved, events would follow their course and there was nothing in the world I could do then to change them.

Suddenly, there was a stirring. The driver got out of the car and, in a blur, I saw my sister slowly rising from the asphalt. I began to sob uncontrollably, whispering over and over, "thank God she is alive," then began to giggle hysterically. My mother had appeared in her nightgown, demanding that Farida tell her at once why she had done this to her. Had she not always been a good mother? Why did her own daughter insist on making her suffer? My sister was too dizzy to react. She had miraculously escaped a potentially deadly accident with minor scratches, which were being covered with ointment as my mother piled more blame on her. The driver was waiting in case my parents wanted to report the accident to the police. It had been his fault, he explained; he was speeding and saw the signorina too late to avoid her. He was prepared to pay for any expenses we incurred. Eventually, seeing that no one was paying him the slightest attention, he walked to his car and departed slowly.

The rest of our stay in Italy was marked by equally momentous but less potentially disastrous events. A Mafioso who seemed to believe that the only acceptable colour for shoes was white (in my book a definite no-no) and moved around with two armed bodyguards requested my hand in marriage. On the day he proposed, he took us to a very

exclusive nightclub in Santa Marguerita, where the then famous Van Vood band was performing. We had problems getting in because my brother and sister were underage, but eventually we were shown to a table where we immediately became the object of much attention. I imagine that we must have stuck out sorely among the patrons in full evening regalia: he, flanked by his thugs and clad in a rumpled orange shirt brown pants and white patent-leather moccasins; I in a nondescript beach dress; and my brother and sister looking like forlorn children who had stayed up past their bedtime. I decided there and then that I did not want to belong to the Mafia.

In Alassio we befriended a family who owned an old lighthouse on the beach. They had transformed it into a delightful home with a small room off every landing of the spiral staircase, and furnished it with fishermen's implements. They had one daughter Farida's age whom they brought up in the strangest way, forbidding her even to listen to music, let alone read books apart from those assigned by her school. Elizabeta's room was picture-pretty, but after we grew to know her better she told us how much she hated it. She was never allowed to mess it up and at night had to slide into bed carefully so she would not ruffle the covers. Her mother would come in to check on her and, if she found any creases, would make her get up, rip off the sheets and force her to make the bed all over again before worming into it once more.

Elizabeta was always morose in her parents' presence, but changed completely when she was with us. We were apparently the only youngsters who met with her parents' standards. They operated on the mistaken belief that we were aristocrats. Elizabeta had a pair of cousins holidaying in Alassio too, but her mother had decreed that they were vulgar and that her precious daughter was not to spend time with them. Elizabeta absolutely adored them and we did what we could to organise encounters. We met with Beatrice and Matteo secretly. They would wait for us a little way from the lighthouse and we would have great fun together. My sister and Matteo liked each other and we encouraged the budding romance. They were both fourteen and looked quite handsome together, my sister tall and slim, with dark hair and bronzed to a crisp, and Matteo, with his unruly fair curls, always red as a lobster from the sun that burned his freckled skin without browning it.

One afternoon, however, as we approached the rendezvous point, we were confronted with an unusual sight: plump Beatrice was wearing a dress which made her look like the mamma she would become in a few years, while Matteo wore a pair of trousers and a white shirt. So far we had only seen them in bathing suits. Matteo, who had looked quite rugged and sporty in his swimming shorts, was positively ridiculous: his shirt had not been ironed and was missing a button, and his trousers had to be seen to be believed. Clearly, the holiday food had done him good, and he was popping out of the sheath that encased him from waist to ankles. Embarrassed at the sight, my sister began to splash him, but he did not rise to the challenge and run after her. Instead, he wailed that she was not to spoil his pantaloni buoni, his good trousers. "Should I laugh or cry?" asked my sister, torn between sorrow that this was his best outfit and mirth at the ludicrous figure. "Someone will be crying soon," I said judiciously, "but it is not going to be you." I knew that it was a matter of days, maybe even hours, before my sister saw the boy with different eyes and Matteo went the way my Mafioso had, that of men we had stopped caring for.

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When we finally returned to Cairo, everything seemed calm, at least on the surface. We should not have made haste, was Maman's opinion. It was not like my father to be an alarmist, however, and I was almost sure something was about to happen. I could feel unrest in the air and among my companions at the Law School. We had been informed that the school year would start late, and began to suspect it would not start at all. We called each other every day and sometimes congregated idly on the steps of the closed building. What next? we wondered dejectedly.

To keep us busy, Maman took Farida and me to Khan El-Khalili, where she bought beads, pearls and semi-precious stones to make us necklaces. We chose delicate brocades for evening dresses and coats. Gone were the days of blue skirts and walking shoes. Farida had the advantage of being the youngest: from the start Maman had been less strict with her and at the age of 13, she was allowed to wear low-cut dresses and tight silk trousers. Unlike me, she had the body for it, as well as a keen interest in clothes, which I, with my embonpoint, was unable to muster seriously. I enjoyed the Khan, however, and imagined it to be the prototype of Cairo's popular quarters.

And then the war broke out. Our enemies were France, Britain and Israel. The outcome of such an aggression was bound to harm us. We stayed home, wondering even more about the future. We missed the Gezira Club. I remember standing at the window, observing the deserted street past our little garden and thinking that life would never be the same. The world I had known was crumbling and disappearing. The telephone rang non-stop as panicked expatriates sought Papa's professional advice.

The French School of Law closed permanently, taken over by the Egyptian armed forces for extra offices. Its students were now at a loss as to what to do to complete their degree. We met at the *Bamboo*, downtown, and tried to guess what the future held. We didn't care about the country's fate: from the start, we had sensed that the Revolution had excluded us, and that we would have to carve out our own place – despite it, not thanks to the circumstances it had created. We belonged to a class of outsiders; we had been targetted from the start, and consequently had become perfectly self-centred. Many of the Law School's former students were thinking of moving to Lebanon, Paris and Geneva, and debated these options lengthily. Others kept their projects a secret.

Wilma and I knew that we were not going anywhere. We were at a dead end and proud nationalist speeches did little to alleviate our anxiety. We knew too little Arabic to fit into the new order. The Canal's nationalisation was not a passing fancy, and for us it was the harbinger of doom. Everything we had known was about to vanish. Some among the foreigners we knew took off without saying goodbye, while others ran around trying to entrust their money and possessions to Egyptian friends before departing. Many asked Papa how to transfer their money, save their property, protect their investments. He had only good coffee and compassionate words to offer. Auction sales became a daily occurrence. French and English schools were taken over by Egyptian staff, while our regular teachers packed in a hurry, remembering 1952. A few scattered cases of brutality indicated further that our European guests who had so far felt at home, had now overstayed their welcome.

By the end of the war, our group at the club had been decimated and my academic career seemed to be in tatters. Cairo University was out of the question, Papa said,

because I had never bothered to learn Arabic. His exhortations to study our language more actively had been mild at best, and I believed Arabic was more or less as important as Latin, which I had studied with little enthusiasm. It had never been emphasised that either language would be helpful in furthering my education. Now my father was trying to relieve himself of responsibility for my future. Through my own negligence, I had ruined one important possibility, he told me; Maman's absolute refusal to let me leave the country eliminated the other alternative. If I insisted on leaving, she would be forced to come with me, she said indignantly; and did I, for a moment, imagine that she could abandon the whole family just of the sake of endowing me with a university degree? She had done her utmost, she added virtuously; had it been up to my father, I would not have gone to school at all. "Look at his daughters," she pointed out. "Did they finish school? Do they have good jobs? Are they doctors, writers, scientists, or even activists like Doria Shafik, militating for women's rights?" And did I seriously imagine for a moment that my father would foot the bill, supposing that she let me go? Besides, why was I complaining to her? She had already done so much for me. Had she engineered the Revolution, nationalised the Canal and kicked the foreigners out? I should take it up with Abdel-Nasser and explain that his actions were depriving me of a brilliant professional life. Maybe he would have a suggestion to make.

Maman wrapped her adamant refusal to let me go abroad in a package of pure parental love and the desire to protect the dearest thing in her life from harm. Any failure to do so would be followed immediately by divine retribution: irreversible harm, even death would necessarily befall the "abandoned" child. Death had brushed me once already, because of Papa's disappointment at my gender: he had neglected to come to the clinic that day and had been shown the consequences of his criminal negligence. Did I need more telling proof? Did I think Maman wanted to be rid of me? If other parents chose another path, it was simply because they experienced less love for their offspring and were happy to be rid of their presence. It was much easier to send one's children away than have them badger their parents continuously. My own genitors were willing to make the sacrifice, put up with my ill temper and disregard my ingratitude, because they harboured far loftier sentiments for me.

I did not suspect at the time that my life would be permanently coloured by this explanation. When my own daughters were born, I began to practice what I thought was the only expression of sincere maternal love. I had to have them near me all the time. Even the school day constituted a betrayal; I vowed never to enjoy as much as a cup of coffee when they were absent. I forbade field trips and holidays with friends on the grounds that I would not be loving them perfectly if I let them go. With time, and to avoid open rebellion, I was forced to give in on occasions. Guilt overwhelmed me at these moments and I became convinced that something terrible was bound to happen the instant they were out of my sight, exactly as my mother had said. I became obsessed with plane and train crashes and automobile accidents, not forgetting kidnapping and mishaps in the home such as gas leaks and tumbles in the bathtub. I had to be constantly around and always vigilant. I believed I should be able to predict disasters and guard my children against them, not wait for them to happen. By nature, I would have been inclined to enjoy my daughters' forays into the real world vicariously. They were born at a time when travelling was not a traumatic undertaking, and youngsters took holidays together as a matter of course. But my husband, who had little interest in the French

proverb that *les voyages forment la jeunesse*, was more interested in avoiding the complications and expense that were part and parcel of the children's relative independence. He was only too happy to align his views with Maman's. Real or imagined dangers were listed and described in the minutest details and soon I felt awful for having contemplated letting them go, even for the day.

The first major blow came when my older daughter, just 19 at the time, pried the door of her cage open and decided to marry an American – just to escape, she told me later, from our overpowering "love". For years I felt that I had failed her dismally and expected a catastrophe to befall her, the plain and well-deserved proof of my delinquency. I should have fought, I told myself over and over; I should have made her husband disappear somehow before they both left for the States. I had allowed this to happen because my love for her was not as strong as Maman's for me; and so for years I waited for the phone to ring announcing that the Heavens had just meted out their punishment.

Unable to retrieve my wayward teenager, now married and in time the mother of two children herself, I concentrated my attention on the youngest, barely 11 at the time of her sister's departure. Soon I was transmitting my anxiety to her, and she rarely left my side. Recently, I began to realise that my obsessional worry was not only poisoning my own life but depriving my daughter of a chance to grow and make decisions based solely on her own desires. Knowing one's disease is a step towards recovery, I have been told; but it takes a long time to be freed of one's demons. There are many painful relapses and all-too-brief periods of sanity. Then the ratio changes, ever so slowly. Only in my old age and with fully-grown children was I able to withstand Maman's insinuations concerning the quality of my different maternal approach with a degree of fortitude, arguing that love does not necessarily need constant closeness to flourish. I have even attempted to hint that her brand of parental love had been selfish. Isn't such sustained concentration on the events of a child's life due in part to a deeply ingrained fear of one's own impending redundancy?

In the days when my future was being decided, however, and Maman scored her decisive victory on my intercontinental ambitions, the name of Doria Shafik, who had been instrumental in securing women's right to vote, rekindled my courage. She had not been deterred by the first difficulty she encountered. I began nagging systematically, which I had never been in the habit of doing. Oddly, I was not interested in pursuing any special discipline; I simply wanted a university degree, which I sensed would finally open the doors to freedom. Surely Maman would let me go then, I reasoned rather naively. I neither wished to stay at home, nor to work as a secretary for one of my father's acquaintances. I do not think that Maman had this in mind, although she suggested as much, but she was momentarily torn between the lack of outlets through which to channel my energies and her fierce personal desire to keep her family united under one roof.

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In January 1957, purely by chance, I enrolled at the American University "at" Cairo. Maman had met Michel Wahba, then the AUC's registrar, at an auction. There was one almost every week, as foreigners allowed to dispose of their furniture hurried to do so before a sequestration order deprived them of their belongings. Many Egyptians, on the other hand, were keen to transform their cash

into more reliable objects, especially at the minimal prices that were being asked, and entire properties were thus hurriedly changing hands. It was a great time for speculators and real estate people. Maman and Mr Wahba wondered together about the authenticity of the sale (some were fake, organised by professional antique dealers wanting to lighten their inventory) then moved on in whispers to the political situation. Finally, he mentioned that students with a French academic background, who had nowhere else to turn, were pouring into his office every day. In no time, Maman had secured an appointment with him for the following week grateful that she had managed to cater to my ambitions while still keeping a firm grip on my movements. Things glided smoothly on from there, although I had to spend an unpleasant semester in the English Language Institute acquiring a working knowledge of English.

I did not regard Americans in general as a sophisticated people although they were not yet at the time massively addicted to fast food. I knew almost nothing about their literature, the only yardstick by which I evaluated civilisations, nor was I tempted to explore it. French academia was the only legitimate forum of learning, I had always believed. I felt that the quality of scholarship must necessarily suffer in an atmosphere where success at sports weighed the same as intellectual achievement; but a stint at the American university was my only chance of reaching my goal. I grabbed at it and so did Wilma, who had been suffering from the same lack of purpose, albeit tempered somewhat by the games she was playing with a cousin in the family garage. If worse came to worst, she could always marry him and have lots of babies, she told me, and only stopped talking about it when I told her that she sounded like an authentic Egyptian girl; the thought of her as a big, fat mamma waddling to the Gezira followed by her brood was so incongruous, I did not want her to refer to the possibility even in jest. I was terrified to contemplate such a possibility for my lithe friend. What if she took this route and I, at a loose end suddenly were tempted to follow her? At 18 I imagined that I already looked like a mother of two and was working hard to improve my appearance. With a family of my own I could kiss youth goodbye before it even started. Besides, I hated whining toddlers who would make constant demands on my precious time.

We chose to major in economics because it was the only department that recognised the year we had spent at the French School of Law and gave us credit for it. That way, we would be out of AUC in three years and free to explore the wide world, thanks to the pots of money we were going to earn in glamourous jobs. I decided that it was time to cut my hair in tune with the modern milieu I was about to enter. I informed Mother that I would do away with my cumbersome tresses. "I no longer want to be Rapunzel," I told her seriously, "American girls wear their hair short." She gave me one of her famous stern looks and I knew at once that this particular project had to be postponed indefinitely.

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During our first year, since some of the classes were terribly boring, we played hooky in the afternoon to watch edifying movies at the St Joseph parish in Zamalek. The young people who were regulars at these screenings were different from us: Greeks, Armenians and Lebanese of a more working-class background, who had been forced to start working as soon as they had graduated from high school. They came all the way from Shubra, Daher and Abbasiya to become part of a more affluent group. Wilma and I decided that they were far more authentic than their AUC counterparts, who received pocket money from their parents. They did not waste any time on stupid theories: they already lived in the world of grownups. We fell in love with them collectively at first, then selected one boy each on whom to concentrate all our attention. In no time, Wilma was going out with Lenny and I envied her tremendously. My own choice showed no interest in me and had a girlfriend of his own. "You have to be more aggressive," my friend advised me. "He will never look at you if you sit in your corner making dead fish eyes at him." I was too embarrassed, sure to do the wrong thing at the wrong moment. It would be better if he noticed me first, I objected. "Fine," said Wilma. "Do as you please, he might invited you to his wedding if you keep acting like a good girl." Piqued by her scorn, I waited for a day when the girlfriend was late, and sat down next to my idol. The film was about to start. He did not seem to notice that I had occupied the seat he had reserved for his usual companion. A little later, she came in and sat directly behind us. At the interval, I offered to get us drinks. When I came back, she had not moved to her regular seat, which I took as a good omen. It was not until several weeks later that I managed to improve on my initial success; that day, he told me to sit next to him, since Nora would not be coming. During the movie, he put his arm around me. I could not wait to tell Wilma that her strategies were highly successful. From there on, I plunged headfirst into a relationship that was to become the most painful and disappointing in my life, and with far greater consequences for my future than I could guess then.

He was Greek, his name was Nino and he lived at home with his parents in Clot Bey, a part of Cairo I had never visited, although I knew that during the war it had been notorious as the prostitutes' sector. At the time it was mainly a Christian quarter, where middle class Copt and Greek families occupied once beautiful, then much neglected, large apartments.He worked in the ticketing department of a travel agency, a rather poorly paid job that was very popular in those days with young men and women who had no particular qualifications. The major attraction was the promise of free airline tickets after a number of years of service, he explained enthusiastically. Hardly a boyfriend who would have pleased my parents – but then again, I had no intention of telling them about him.

Nino was considerably older that we were, probably in his early thirties. It never occurred to me to wonder why he was hanging out with teenagers. He looked like Zorba before Anthony Quinn immortalised his features, with an impressive mustache and a strong nose that had been slightly flattened in a bar brawl, he claimed with pride. I found him handsome beyond description and very manly, as opposed to the boys I had known before. He treated me with superb indifference and implied that I was nothing but a rich brat in need of a serious dose of reality. There was a world outside the Gezira Club and the AUC, he told me, showing nothing but contempt for these two allegedly aristocratic institutions to which he did not belong. He made it a point to meet me at

the less fashionable cinemas of Emadeddin Street, which screened European films. He had no car and never offered to pick me up.

Having told Maman that I had to stay late at the library, I would slip off campus and run all the way to the appointed place to wait for him, sometimes for as long as an hour, often in vain. I would stand in a corner, conscious of young men's inquisitive looks, and revel bitterly in my humiliation. I was spoiled and stupid; why did I think I deserved special treatment? I often waited until the end of the screening and carefully observed the spectators coming out, half expecting him to walk past me with another girl. When he called eventually, I would never mention the missed appointment, or the acute anxiety attacks that beset me as I waited for the telephone to ring. It was enough to hear his voice. No matter how many times he repeated the performance, I lived in the hope that he would see how much I loved him and decide to change his ways.

Consulted, Wilma said wisely that, unlike her own boyfriend, Nino could not attach himself to me seriously because I did not give him what he really wanted. When I pressed her to tell me what it was that I was withholding, she appeared taken aback by my naivety. "Sex," she finally said. "You are not prepared to give him sex." Strange as it may seem, I had never thought about it, nor suspected that this was what Wilma was doing when she disappeared at parties. "He's never asked," I objected, suddenly puzzled. Was I unattractive? Too fat? "He must know you are not that kind of girl," said Wilma. "You are a Muslim. Your parents will kill you both if they ever find out, and he is aware of the danger." I was overwhelmed by the weight of my inferior culture, which Wilma obviously did not share. It was absolutely true that Maman had impressed upon me the fact that my life would be totally ruined if I ever became intimate with a boy before marriage: "As long as you do not do it, everything is possible: you will have a bright future before you and will always be able to hold your head high. If you give in to boys, you will become a fallen woman, despised by all men, and remain a spinster for the rest of your life." I had argued then that my sisters were not reviled but feted, and were having a great time marrying one man after another, all of whom invariably pampered them. "They were born in a more permissive era," Maman said grimly; "besides, they were not my daughters."

Now that I was thinking of Maman's stern warning, I realised that I had been watched more carefully at home lately, and that, once or twice, I had caught Nenna examining the panties that I had just discarded in the washing. I needed Wilma to reassure me. "What is she looking for, do you think?" I had asked her. "She wants to know if you are still a virgin," was my best friend's pronouncement. "How can she tell?" The answer did not enlighten me: "The blood." Wilma dropped the two words impatiently. "But there is blood when I have my period," I insisted. According to Wilma, it was not the same blood, and someone experienced could tell the difference from the smell. I had no doubt that Nenna could.

Now, as I became more aware of the danger of a real relationship, I imagined that it would be quite romantic to die in this way. Nino would be tortured by remorse and, unlike my father and Laura, would not be given a second chance. He would throw himself on my coffin as I had often seen actors do in films, and, choking with bravely contained pain, would swear that he would never love anyone else. He would go every day to stand for hours on my grave, place a fresh red rose on the white marble slab,

and drench it with his tears. I quite liked the scenario, and made a note to elaborate on it some more. That Muslim burial customs did not allow for a free standing marble slab caused me no headache since in those days I ignored everything of the practical sides of death, having never attended a funeral.

"How do you stop yourself from being pregnant?" I asked my mentor. I was suddenly struck with this even more life-threatening possibility. Would my father kill me if I ever had a baby with Nino? "You pray," Wilma said shortly. "It works." She was a devout Catholic. She went to church on Sundays and to confession every Saturday. She told her confessor about all her sins and he gave a large number of Hail Marys to recite. Thus cleansed, she could turn the sin meter back to zero and start afresh. It irked me that no such devices existed in my religion. On the other hand, perhaps Nino was not familiar with the kind of risk I was going to take for his sake. Maybe it would be a good thing to let him know that, in my family, any girl who had premarital sex was slaughtered mercilessly. He had no way of knowing about my stepsisters. But then they never produced any children, forcing my father to wash his obvious shame in their blood. I had better get on my knees quickly I decided before remembering with a pang that I had nothing to fear yet: Nino rarely gave me a kiss. Still, I felt immensely important, aggrandised by my status of future victim who had laid down her life for love. All I had to do now was convince Nino that he wanted to have sex with me and that I was ready. I would not let his rather distant demeanour stand in the way. Maybe he knew after all of the risks and had been reluctant to demand that I place my life in jeopardy. I would reassure him, telling him that I was the one who wanted it. On second thought, it might be better then to abstain from mentioning the terrible punishment that would certainly crown my daring action. He would have plenty of time to find out, when it was over.

I rearranged the seduction scene and rewrote the dialogues several times in my head, imagining various roles in which I could appear helplessly possessed by the demon of love, or joyfully liberated and ready to experiment simply because it was my right as a modern woman. Meanwhile, in real life I was getting nowhere. Wilma, on a short holiday in Alexandria, had managed to smuggle her boyfriend into her hotel room and spend an entire night with him. I, on the other hand, had absolutely no progress to report. We went to parties and Nino remained aloof, often sitting in a corner engrossed in a magazine. He was always highly critical of rich kids and I decided to prove to him that I shared his sentiment. I was going to be leaving home soon, I informed him, as casually as I could, because I refused to be cocooned any longer. I was disgusted by my parents' wealth and intended to live in Sayeda Zeinab, on my own. I had never been to Sayeda Zeinab, but it had been close to the Law School, and the students with leftist tendencies had always started their impassioned diatribes with "have you ever seen how the poor live in Sayida Zeinab?"

I finally managed to attract Nino's interest with my stupid prattle for more than a few minutes. "Are your parents that rich?" he asked, looking at me as if he had never seen me before. Believing that by making them richer than they actually were (in fact, I did not have the faintest idea of their worth) I was delaying the moment when he would forget about me, I described imaginary properties, cars, land and villas all over Egypt. "It is disgusting," I concluded, trying to give a sad ring to my words, to let him guess the extent of my predicament. "But soon I'll be through with all that," I added, inserting

a happy giggle towards the end of the sentence. He had to understand that I considered poverty a blessed state. "I'll live in a room without electricity [I wasn't sure if Sayeda Zeinab apartments featured running water, so I abstained from conjuring up images of myself carrying pails filled at the public tap on my head], and with the bare minimum: a mattress to sleep on, a few nails behind the door for my clothes ... [Had I read about such a room, or seen it in a movie? No matter; the object now was to make an impact on Nino, not to dwell on the precision of academic recollections.] I am going to start being a real person," I concluded firmly. Nino gazed at me with a new curiosity. His mustache twitched as if he were trying to contain a smile. "How about university?" he asked. "I thought it was important to you." I had been ready for the question. "I'll drop out, of course: university is entertainment for rich kids. I mean to get a job and support myself." Was it time to suggest that he could come and visit me as he pleased in my new abode? Reluctant to make a faux pas now that I had scored, I decided to broach this particular subject a little later. That night, Nino kissed me for the very first time before disappearing into the night.

I could hardly wait to tell Wilma. She was not as supportive as I had expected her to be and dampened my enthusiasm at once. "I would not insist too much on this peculiar vow of poverty that you seem to have made on the spur of the moment," she said. "I did not want to tell you, but Lenny and Nino are involved with two other girls who are also best friends, and the boys are planning to marry them because they are both filthy rich. Lenny told me that neither of them wants to get married, but they are willing to do it just to get their hands on some of this money." For the first time, I did not believe that Wilma had my best interests at heart. She was jealous because I was catching up with her. We parted quite coldly and I avoided mentioning Nino to her from then on.

I kept seeing Nino on and off for a year. I lived in a sort of dream. Events outside the scope of my immediate preoccupation, including what was happening at home and at university, had no significance. They belonged to another world, one I was not part of. One day, Nino came to the parish late. The film had already started. He tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to come outside. It was dusk, and walking in the narrow streets around St Joseph's Church was not very conducive to conversation. We couldn't sit in the garden because the priest on duty was careful to thwart any attempts at a tête-à-tête. Finally we sat on a low wall supporting the iron fence of a villa on Ahmed Hishmat Street. "There is this girl," said Nino, and my heart sank. "I was going steady with her for several years and then she had to leave after 1956. I have been trying to forget her. Now she sent me poems that she has written about our time together. She wants me to go to England ..." I had nothing to say. "I want your advice," he told me, "you are a sensible girl." Clearly I had been relegated to the role of best friend. I was too deeply hurt even to want to cry. I kept thinking no, no, this is not happening, please God, make him take back the words. Nino pushed a little notebook into my hand. "Let's go back," he said. "You can read the poems later."

I was grateful to have been trained thoroughly in accomplishing the simple, essential tasks that indicate to an observer that one is still alive. Only this expertise carried me through the rest of the evening. When I was finally alone in my room I began to read the collection of atrociously childish verses that a lucky girl – called unbelievably Dotty Bobo – had written, confident that the object of her passion shared the same feelings.

Even in my state of near insanity, I was able to note that the poor thing was semi-literate at best. Should I tell Nino that the poems were beautiful? Or critique them honestly? If I did the former, I would lose him to her, but if I went along with the latter, he would believe that I was simply jealous. At no point did I guess that he had entrusted me with his girlfriend's literary efforts simply because he could not read English fluently and wanted someone to tell him what she was saying. The following day, Nino called me. He was not feeling well, he said, but needed the poems at once. He had to read them again to be able to make up his mind. This increased my panic and I decided that I would bring him the notebook myself. "Give me your exact address," I whispered. "I'll be there in half an hour."

I told Mother that I had forgotten to return a book to a student who needed it for an impending test. I would not be long. I ran out before she had time to stop me and ask questions. My heart was beating hard in the taxi. I had no doubt that something momentous was about to happen. Clot Bey Street looked incredibly shabby, but teemed with life under the streetlights. There were people everywhere: women hurrying along with shopping bags, men sitting at cafés with their glasses of tea and shishas, children playing on the footpaths and cars honking, painstakingly attempting to make their way among the street vendors and the donkey carts. It was a bit like Khan El-Khalili, I thought, only less colourful. So this is where real people live, I told myself in wonderment. The taxi stopped in front of an old building, which needed major scrubbing before one could begin to notice the beauty of its convoluted adornments.

On trembling legs, I climbed painfully to the fourth floor, feeling a coat of grime progressively cover my palms as I gripped the wrought-iron banister. The door was an old-fashioned one, of cheap wood, with unpolished, opaque glass protected by twisted iron bars. I listened to the sound of the bell echoing inside the apartment. Nino appeared, wearing a T-shirt, trousers and a pair of woman's slippers. He moved away from the door to let me in. I was a little disappointed by the traditional mashrabiya that was the prominent feature of all the furnishing. It was present in the three pieces occupying the place of honour in the small salon, the buffet of the dining room, the side tables and the numerous chairs that skirted the room, not unlike those in the waiting rooms of clinics. The place did not look interestingly Spartan, but awfully middle-class, with drab chintzes, artificial flowers, holy pictures and numerous crucifixes on the walls.

Nino led me to his room. It was tiny, crammed with dark furniture and poorly lit by a naked bulb (probably 40 watts) hanging from the ceiling. I hated bedrooms that did not feature a bedside lamp, creating a warm halo over the books read in bed, and adding to the reader's feeling of comfort and delight. I quickly looked around. There was not a book in sight. In the weak, greyish light, the sheets appeared less than pristine, without however giving the impression of being downright dirty. I was overcome with a sense of despair. Tears welled up in my eyes. Surprised, Nino asked me why, but I was at a loss for words. It was a mixture of sorrow brought about by the squalid surroundings, gnawing jealously and fear that Nino was about to disappear from my life. Finally he decided to kiss me instead of attempting to extract a sensible meaning from the words pouring through my sobs. We rolled on the bed and the last thing I saw before closing my eyes was the notebook lying on the pillow.

The brutal act that followed had nothing to do with the feelings I had harboured so far for Nino. When it was over, he pushed me towards the bathroom, where I washed with cold water and dried myself with a grubby bath towel. While I was putting my clothes on, I noticed a huge cockroach scurrying across the floor. Somehow, I judged that its appearance was in harmony with the dirty little operation we had just performed. I was amazed at the importance with which it was endowed. I had found it painful, and rather ridiculous, if anything. It did nothing to enhance one's dignity. Incongruously, I wondered if Nino had kept his mother's slippers on all the time. I contemplated the possibility of asking him, then thought better of it. I was in a hurry to leave the place, shedding as I moved towards the door all the tender feelings that I had managed to keep alive so far. If this was love's happy conclusion, I wanted no part of it.

Outside, I was surprised and relieved to see that the street had not changed. I had just ruined my life and people kept playing backgammon on the footpaths. When I arrived home, my mother was having an argument with my grandmother and barely looked at me. I still remember the ashen taste that the chicken leg I had for dinner left in my mouth.

The following day, I was not surprised when Nino did not call; it was clear in my mind that it was over. The school year was finishing too, and soon we would be going to Alexandria. After 1956, trips abroad were no longer mentioned and my mother had bought a charming English-style villa on the hill in Rushdi. It had become our summer retreat. There was no longer a secluded beach to go to, but the Automobile Club had a salt-water swimming pool and we could enjoy the sun while my parents spent the day at tables in the shade, chatting with their friends.

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I had to pack my summer things for the holidays but could not bring myself to do it. I felt exhausted and sad. Wilma and I were barely on speaking terms and I did not think that I wanted to confide in her. The days dragged on. I read constantly, hoping to find answers, or at least solace, in books. One night, I decided suddenly that I had had enough. My life was ruined; it might as well be over. I no longer entertained the hope that Nino would collapse, weeping, on my grave: he belonged to the past and was nothing but a remote memory. I did not plan anything. Searching through our first-aid box, I discovered flu medicine that carried a warning on the label about overdosing. That would do, I decided. I swallowed the full contents and went to lie down. After a while, my ears began ringing disagreeably and I saw my mother standing over my bed in a haze. "You took something," she was yelling. "Tell me what you took." I wanted her to stop screaming in my ear; I just wanted to be left alone, but she kept shaking me. Finally I told her, and she bolted to the telephone. Soon I was taken to the nearby Papayouhanou Hospital, where they pumped my stomach. My mother kept insisting that I had food poisoning, because the last thing she wanted was for the incident to be reported to the police as an attempted suicide. When they began to ask me questions I was conscious enough to corroborate my mother's story. In the morning, they let me go. My mother and I seemed to have reached a tacit agreement never to mention what had just happened. I am not even sure she ever told my father. From then on, however, she watched me like a hawk.

We left for Alexandria a week later. I refused to go to the Automobile Club and lay in bed all day, reading until the letters blurred in front of my eyes. I did not want to think. And then one morning it suddenly hit me like a bolt of thunder. My period was late. That was a twist I had not expected. I was completely clueless: whom could I turn to? "Pray," Wilma had said. I did, for three days and nights non-stop. Finally my prayers were answered. The miracle shook me out of my lethargy. There was more to life than virginity, I told myself. I was lucky; I could still have a glamourous career if I concentrated on studying instead of crying over spilt milk. I wanted to go back to university at once. I followed my family to the club every morning, and went to the movies with Karim and Farida at the San Stefano, where we watched two or three films in a row.

TALK OF MARRIAGE

In the fall, I went back to AUC filled with good resolutions. I became engrossed in my studies and took an interest in university life. Many of the teachers were really good, and keen to guide us through uncharted territories. Not all of them were as superficial and stiff as I had thought at first. I rediscovered my pleasure in textbooks and learning. After classes I met with a group of students at the Gezira Club. We talked about classical works and new authors and exchanged reading material. Newcomers joined our group from time to time. This is how I met Alain, who harboured the same passion as I had for Heredia's colourful poetry. A Syrian with a predominantly French education, he was having a bad time at Cairo University and had decided to transfer to AUC. We talked about it and one day, at the beginning of the second semester, I saw him standing at the university gate waiting for me.

We went to classes together and he took me horse riding. We played bridge with other young couples. He was gentle and very well read, and had a tremendous sense of humour. We had a lovely, easy time. He loved animals as much as I did and we picked up several strays, including a rabbit that I smuggled into the office off our dining room. Alain eventually gave the rabbit to his bachelor uncle. Years later, I heard that it had fallen out the window and that Alain, furious, had sued the old man for negligence.

Alain came to pick me up every morning at five o'clock. I had a huge pot of food ready, cooked by my grandmother the evening before. We would go around Zamalek and feed all the strays that we could find. We waged war against the donkey-cart owners who mistreated their animals, and forced them to give us their horses and donkeys temporarily against a small payment. The beasts were returned to their owners after a period at the Brookes Hospital, where their sores were dressed and their stomachs properly filled. I picked up two mongrels that became a new cross for my mother to bear. Nenette, a tiny female puppy, had been hit by a car near the university, and was whimpering in the gutter by the time we arrived on the crime scene, alerted by her initial howl.

We took her to a vet nearby, where she spent a couple of weeks until she mended properly. By then, we had tried and discarded all the possible scenarios for her future: we could no longer keep her there, but we had to admit that she was too unstylish ever to be adopted by anyone and that we had nowhere to put her. Once more, I used the little office, but to avoid foreseeable disasters (she would certainly not be able to use the garden) while we were contemplating various impossibilities, we tied palm reed baskets together into a sort of pen. We lined the bottom with thick layers of newspaper and hoped for the best.

As Nenette began to grow, one change of newspapers a day became sorely insufficient. The strong smell emanating from the room attracted the stray cats in the garden, and they came to growl under the door, which led directly to the second problem. As any respectable dog would do, Nenette began to bark her indignation, firstly at being held captive and secondly at having to put up with unsolicited feline sniffing. It would be a matter of time before my mother heard her and investigated the source of the sound. I no longer enjoyed going out because I was never sure that our little stowaway would not be discovered in my absence. Another inconvenience was that despite our efforts,

the dog's urine had seeped onto the parquet floor, of which large sections were coming unstuck. Upon more careful examination, we also noticed an abundance of white powder around the cage, a sure sign that termites were slowly destroying it. They would soon begin attacking the furniture. Finally we agreed that I would throw myself upon my mother's mercy and threatened to follow Nenette if I was told to get rid of her. Maman made a scene, but Nenette was not devoid of social skills and looked so helpless and adoring that my mother soon relented and let us keep the dog upstairs, where she lived in sumptuous comfort until the day she died, aged 15, a respectable age for a small dog. Only when she discovered the damaged done to the parquet did my mother turn against me and I was forced to give up my meager stipend for a year. By this time however the whole family loved the small dog and I did not really mind the ire directed solely towards my lack of consideration for my parents property.

Tosca, on the other hand, had not been a roadside victim. She came to me as a puppy with the assurance that she would grow into a perfect watchdog. Although I made unconvincing noises to make my mother believe that she was a dwarf German shepherd, my spiel had little effect. Maman knew a mongrel when she saw one, no matter how small. A few days after occupying our garden, Tosca became desperately ill. The vets consulted were unanimous: the dog had distemper, a near-fatal disease.

Maman, who liked animals as much as we did but pretended not to, in a desperate attempt to avoid the plague of various foundlings that constantly seemed to cross our path, sprang into action. She wanted to save the poor little thing, even though she intended to give it away afterwards. "Isn't it a German Shepherd?" she asked sarcastically. "Well, I'll offer it to the Police Academy." Ever resourceful, my mother found a German vet who was prepared to try a new treatment on the dog. For three weeks we took Tosca in for various injections; eventually, she was cured. The only drawback was that she had suffered slight brain damage. She now viewed us as the enemy and attacked us, while peeing for joy every time a stranger presented himself at the gate. At first, we though it was sidesplitting but in time discovered that she had a very unpleasant way of digging her canines into our ankles.

As Tosca grew, her condition deteriorated (but not her set of strong teeth) to the point where she had to be isolated on the terrace. Only my brother dared move her when the floor had to be cleaned. For this he wore an armour made of a colander to cover his face, heavy boots to protect his feet, a broom to direct the beast to her temporary destination and a chair to shield the rest of his body. He was quite a sight but we rarely laughed, knowing that if Tosca got hold of him, she would make him pay dearly for his efforts. Whatever disorder Tosca had developed after she had been saved, it did not alter the very long course of her life nor her undying hostility towards us.

During that period, Nino came knocking on our door, insisting that he wanted to see me. I told the servant to inform the gentleman that he was not welcome, and never to come to my house again. It did not take more to discourage him terminally. I was to discover during my life that I was not the type of woman with whom men fall desperately in love. None of those I met or associated with ever threatened to commit suicide, or even divorce their wives, for my sake. Early on, I had to come to terms with the knowledge that I did not inspire devastating passion – which turned out to be a blessing in disguise, since I very quickly lost interest in the

objects of my "eternal" ardor. Total indifference invariably followed on the heels of the most burning passions

Years later, someone mentioned that Nino had married the rich girl he had been seeing in tandem with me, and was making her thoroughly unhappy. I derived no pleasure from the information, or from the rumour that he had abandoned her and emigrated to Canada. He had become a total stranger. He died when he was barely 50 from a massive heart attack, and if I felt anything at the news, it was a slight relief.

Meanwhile, with Alain around, I was living the carefree days that I should have experienced had I not met a scoundrel when I was a mere beginner. We never mentioned sex and thought of ourselves rather as close friends. The smouldering feelings that I had experienced so wastefully less than a year before seemed unreal, something I might have read about in a book. I realised that I carried in my body the physical evidence of my escapade, but I was still not ready to face the problem. Somehow, I deceived myself into believing that this wound had healed as thoroughly as its emotional twin. Anyway, it was not an issue now, and I therefore persuaded myself that if and when I came to that particular bridge, I would know how cross it.

Another year went by, during which I dieted seriously and shed the extra 20 kilos I had been battling with on and off (but rather on than off) for most of my life. I was quite pleased with myself and in a generally buoyant mood. Then Alain began to allude to a future together. He was my best friend and I could not bear to hide the truth from him. So one night as he was driving me home, I told him. He listened attentively as I accused myself of having engineered the whole thing. I did not have the excuse of being a victim, I insisted. It had all been my doing. He drove in silence for a while and then asked me if it still bothered me. "No, I feel as if it had never happened," I said truthfully. "Then we will never mention it again," he simply said. We didn't. But my days of happiness were about to end.

Maman had started to become annoyed with my relationship. People were talking, she said. I was acquiring a bad reputation. Her friends had reported seeing me in strange places. At first, I feigned indifference: "And what were your friends doing there?" I asked. "It is none of people's business where I go; do I follow them?" I sometimes bickered, for the sake of bringing variety to my witticisms. I felt less sure of myself than I pretended to be. Was she following us to Heliopolis and to that friend's house where we went sometimes to smoke pot on the terrace? It seemed highly unlikely, but then I could never put anything past Maman. After all, she had appeared at AUC, poking her head around the classroom door on more than one occasion, just to make sure I was not playing hooky. I did not care much for the smoking (it gave me a stinking headache and I only kept it up as a sign that I was liberated), but I did like our evenings on the roof: With a little wine and a few pounds worth of hashish, we could show our true selves: a group of young people with the silver spoons wrenched brutally from our mouths, with no future in their own country and nowhere else to go. We had been promised security if we did well at school, and we had kept our side of the bargain; now, the Revolution had changed the equation. We speculated about how difficult it would be to make our way in the wide world, and realised we were woefully unprepared. We may have boasted a well-rounded education, but we had not been trained to hold a proper job. We feared competition and ultimate rejection.

As smoke billowed through the evening breeze, we shared our concerns. Tomorrow we would put our masks back on and talk offhandedly about the opportunities offered in Canada, Australia or Beirut and our imminent departure. Travel was forbidden to all Egyptians and on some idle afternoons we drove to the airport to see airplanes taking off and to dream about far-away destinations. At these moments, I felt a surge of excitement: I would certainly do well – if only I was allowed the freedom to fly away. I had never been in an airplane: my father was terrified of them, and made jokes which I soon appropriated when friends asked why we went to the trouble of sailing to Europe. "God gave us the power to swim, but no wings to fly," I repeated endlessly, having found an irrefutable logic in this explanation. In fact, I felt that I was missing out on a momentous experience and believed that those who had gone through it were superior beings. I was also convinced that the flat Egyptian landscape produced people lacking imagination and stamina. Once immersed in "real nature," with lakes and mountains, forests and rocky shores, I was bound to lose my dullness and grow out of my limited horizon. At school, I had learned that we had a climate, unlike Europe, where one spoke of the weather. Many teachers ascribed our lethargy to the weightiness of our air. Other countries possessed the power of changing us into quick-witted, able bodies, whose blood would be stirred by long walks in the fresh air, whose eyes would be cleansed by green vistas and whose artistic sense would be aroused by beautifully built cities. Here we were, deprived of the very essence of life and condemned by a ruthless regime to rot in slothfulness.

Alain did not talk of going places however and for the time being at least I just wanted to be with him. He was not a young man in a hurry and I rather liked him that way. But it took more than quips and feigned arrogance to silence the Queen Mother. Finally she gave me an ultimatum: either Alain came to talk to my father right after graduation, or I should tell him in no uncertain terms that I was not the girl for him. If neither happened, she would lock me up in the house until my father found me a suitable husband. Furthermore, she would talk to Alain's parents and ask them if they would like their son to marry a Muslim. "I don't think they will take kindly to that prospect," she added, smiling sweetly. I did not really take her seriously, but I was worried nevertheless. How could I present this new snag in our relationship to Alain, just after I had confided in him? He was the one who had brought up the question of marriage. But in his mind, it was something that would eventually take place in a distant future. Now he was going to think that I was pressuring him to save my skin. There was no way I wanted him to believe that I had been less than ingenuous, especially since all I had wanted was to present him with the facts. I loved him dearly, but on the other hand, I was slowly realising that a whole life with him would be boring beyond imagination. It was not his fault. He had not changed and was still sweet and attentive, witty and very, very clever. It was simply that I had finally become uninterested in the good, clean feelings he inspired in me. He was my friend, my brother. But a husband? I decided to postpone broaching the subject, which was rather easy, since we were both cramming for our final exams. In a few months we would be graduating. I would think about a new strategy to calm Maman then. It seemed eons away.

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The day came, however, and it was a very sad one. While my record was far from distinguished, it allowed me to leave AUC with my degree in hand. Alain had failed dismally. Not only was he not graduating at the same time as I was, but he had no hope for a winter graduation either. He would have to repeat a number of courses, or change

majors and start all over again. At home, we had a scene. "Dump him now," screamed Maman. I would stick by him, I screamed back, whether she liked it or not. She didn't, and advised me to look for a job, because there would be no pocket money from then on. She probably suspected that I had started to smoke and knew that I needed money, at least to indulge my habit. Strangely, though, she did not cancel my graduation party, which, exceptionally, was taking place at home. It actually did and it was a day to remember in more ways than one.

The reception area had not seen guests since my father's illness, and I shivered with delight as I saw it come to life again. We had a lovely time – so lovely that someone splashed wine on the Louis XVI sofa. My heart sank. Alain, with admirable presence of mind, immediately spread salt on the spot and we continued to carouse; but my stomach was churning at the thought of what would happen when Maman discovered the damage.

It was far worse than I had anticipated. I confessed, a little shame-faced, and she reacted as if she had lost a loved one. She finally made her erstwhile voice teacher proud that night, running the whole scale from soprano shrieks to baritone sobs. She was still going on at dawn. The sofa was upholstered in French material, acquired before Nasser stopped foreign imports, she wailed. It was irreplaceable. I would never, ever be able to make it up to her.

In the morning, I ran to my stepsisters' apartment. I was sobbing so hysterically that it took me some time to explain what had happened. At first they had thought I was bringing really bad news. When they finally understood my predicament, they began to giggle uncontrollably. "Ask your mother how much she would like you to pay in damages," they teased between peals of laughter. "She can invest the money on the stock market and will soon be able to buy herself not only a new sofa, but two armchairs and a coffee table as well," said one. "She will be able to redo the house from top to bottom," the other added.

They tried to make me see how ridiculous it all was, but my despair was bottomless and their pleasantries did little to calm me. I called Alain. We went searching for the material in various shops and found the same design at the Salon Vert on Qasr El-Nil Street – but the colour was manifestly not the same. The original material was a delicate Nile green dusted with little pink roses. The one on offer was light pink with burgundy roses. I knew my mother would not overlook such a detail. "She will say it is not the same," I told Alain desperately. "My uncle is going to France. I'll ask him to buy the material there," he responded, unsure how to placate me. "It will take time," I argued. "She said she wants it fixed now." We drove to Zamalek, to the shop of the upholsterer my mother patronised. We took him with us and smuggled him into the drawing room. Could he redo the sofa in such a way as to conceal the spot? If not, then what? He began measuring. A brief calculation informed us that we could change the entire set for 90 pounds, including the imported material. It was a lot for us, but not totally beyond reach. If necessary, we could raise part of the money by selling Alain's watch. Meanwhile, the craftsman was examining the sofa. "Where is the spot?" he asked. We inspected it minutely, but could no longer find a trace of the wine.

My heart sang. I was blessed. "The spot is gone," I told my sulking mother. At first she refused to answer and finally hissed: "I want the set replaced, do you understand? And it will cost 300 pounds, at least." This was not the scenario I had imagined. I needed a new

ally, and gathered my courage to approach my father. I told him the whole story. He shrugged. "When did your mother last receive guests in that room?" he asked. "She has not opened it since the Revolution. What does it matter if there is a spot?" I explained that the spot had gone. "So what does she want?" wondered my father. I murmured that she wanted 300 pounds. "She wants you to feel totally unable to make it up to her. It is her way of telling you how sad she is that you have grown up She is terrified of losing you. Besides, your mother is a good businesswoman," he added, smiling. I thought he sounded proud of her, and more amused than displeased. "She never misses a chance to make some extra money. Go and tell her that the money tree has stopped bearing fruit. Abdel-Nasser picked it all. That will upset her enough to stop her from carrying on. As for you, I suggest that you forget the whole incident and concentrate on getting a life."

My parents seemed to be playing a game with each other. I had accidentally stumbled into it and probably should have learned the rules earlier, if I had wanted to keep things in perspective. The spot-free eau-de-Nil material is still on the sofa today, ageing slowly and covered with dust in the abandoned villa. Maman never forgot the incident, though; the stain, if it spared the sofa, had marked my reputation indelibly.

I had not forgotten Maman's advice to seek employment, and immediately acted on the challenge, spurred on now by the sofa debacle. I had to have my own money. There were not that many Egyptian women on the job market in those days. I looked a bit too stylish to work as a salesgirl, and had not the faintest idea what else I was qualified to do with my degree in economics. I was not a certified accountant, nor was I in a position to start my own business. In all my years at university, I had never contemplated the practical side of the education process. Secretarial work was not an option either, since I was a dismal typist and had never been able to absorb the rudiments of stenography imparted at the Berlitz School, where Wilma and I had enrolled briefly during our bout of communism; we had wanted to belong to the real world, but soon forgot about that project. Finally, I found a job in the sales department of a travel and tourism agency. I was paid 30 pounds a month, a handsome salary in the early 1960s. The agency belonged to a family friend.

The only tourists venturing to Egypt that year were French (usually members of the highbrow Connaissance des Arts group, which was on a tight budget), or impoverished Russians encouraged by our socialist policies. I specialised in devising cheap itineraries that included half-day visits to the Pyramids and the Egyptian Museum, a full day in Saqqara and a tour of Khan El-Khalili on the way to the airport. Was this what life had in store for me, then? Ten long hours every day, six days a week: hardly an eloquent testimony to my existence. On the bright side, Alain and I had plenty of money. The only problem was that we were both too tired to take advantage of my good fortune. As punishment, he had been required to work in his father's office where he was being initiated in the esoteric processes of textile manufacturing. He would remain there if he failed university again.

He had decided to change major and start over, which meant another four years to wait. We would both be twenty-six by then: not very old by today's standards, but unthinkable as far as Maman was concerned. She predicted that once I had waited for him to finish, his parents would select a good Syrian Christian girl of eighteen and I would be left high and dry. Of course, there was

that risk. I knew Alain's parents blamed me for his failure. Furthermore, Alain and I had never broached the subject of religion, but it remained an undeniable problem. Would his parents accept that he convert to Islam? Something else was disturbing me, too: I did not like to be the one earning a living. From very early on, I had been indoctrinated in the roles of men and women, and I knew the former did the earning while the latter could be counted on to do the spending. In my particular situation, it was the other way around and I felt that we could never be a proper couple until the situation was righted. How could he be the boss if he still had to wait for his rather stingy parents to hand over his pocket money?

Then my stepsisters made an entrance on the scene. They began to invite me insistently to their parties, insinuating that I had not yet met grown men and that it would be good for me to see them up close before I made up my mind to throw my life away on a loser. Obviously, Maman, or maybe even my father, had turned to them for help, and they had joined forces for the occasion. At first I refused vehemently, but I was tempted nevertheless. Maman offered to ask the famous stylist Nêne Jabès to make me a real evening dress "for an interesting outing." she said, "at a nightclub or a special party, one of these places where Alain never takes you." I accepted the dress and went for the fittings. The result was impressive: a black knee-length satin sheath with a plunging décolleté that I wore with a red rose at the belt. I was dying to show it off, but was not likely to do so with Alain, who had no interest in nightlife. As a "poor" student, he could not really do anything that required spending money.

That summer, he came to Alexandria, where we were holidaying, with a friend, both of them penniless and very hungry after their train trip from Cairo. I had to sneak int o the kitchen repeatedly and steal whatever food could be tucked into pita bread, then pass it to them through the window. Alain had been welcome at home on and off, according to Maman's whims; that summer, she was off him. Insensitive to her mood, not only was I seeing him behind her back, but I was feeding him with the proceeds of Nenna's labour. Had she discovered my larcenies, I would certainly have been confined to my room, the standard punishment she had devised for me.

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"We are going to the roof of the Semiramis tonight," said my sister on the phone. "Care to join us?" I suddenly made up my mind. I would have to lie to Alain – for the first time – but I really had to wear that dress. I was now as slim as I had always dreamt of being, thanks to my prolonged diet of two Nabisco saltines (heavy as a punch in the stomach, and tasting vaguely of dust and cumin) and pots of black coffee at every meal, and I thought I looked quite adult with my elaborate upsweep and the makeup my mother had helped me apply rather generously. I had a wonderful time, dancing with men twice my age to the rhythm of Sandro's excellent band, my Miss Dior perfume mingling deliciously with the scent of the jasmine necklaces the gentlemen had offered their partners. I also had my first taste of scotch accompanied by a strong coffee chaser. This was a strategy designed to increase my capacity to drink, while still remaining reasonably sober – somewhat self-defeating, perhaps, but thrilling nonetheless. I considered this new practice

a clear indication that I was coming of age: "Welcome to the world, my dear; this is where you really belong," I told myself happily before closing my eyes at dawn. I was definitely made for a life of ease and pampering. The poor and the wretched would have to go on without me. I had been born to money and all my problems had stemmed from not knowing my place. I had finally come home.

Many more such outings followed, and I acquired the habit of making up my face even during the day, a practice disapproved of by young men, but normal for those over forty. Alain, perhaps suspicious of the frequent bouts of inexplicable fatigue that required me to go home as soon as I left the office, became antagonistic for the first time in our relationship. He let me know that his friends did not like me, and even transmitted a few of their remarks: they said I looked much too old for him, and, with all that makeup on, resembled his mother. This, unfortunately, prodded another very sore point most indelicately. His parents had never asked to meet me and I suspected he had never told them that he was serious about me. We began to bicker every time we saw each other. I found out that he was going to parties alone, and I was certainly not willing to allow him what I allowed myself. When he proposed to drive around on New Year's Eve and have a picnic of *fuul* and *ta'miya* in the car, I announced that it was over.

I had a good reason for choosing that particular day: one of my sisters' friends, an attaché at the Egyptian Embassy in Russia, was coming to her New Year's party and bringing a kilo of caviar along. I was by now very fond of the scrumptious dishes I had discovered in the company of these bons vivants, and I had no intention of missing out on the feast. Alain could cruise alone for all I cared, or invite one of the girls he met at the parties he went to without me to share his sandwiches. Furthermore, my second new dress, again worn advantageously only by the very slim, looked absolutely smashing. It was imperative that I display it before it became a common sight and I was forced to discard it the way I had the first, when my sister warned me that it had been "seen too often".

Very happy that I had broken up with Alain, my mother did not complain about the late hours I was keeping. When no Croesus appeared on the scene to ask for my hand in marriage, however, she reverted to her old ways, waiting for me at the window and welcoming me with a resonant "here comes the whore," which was loud enough to be heard by the gallant companions who drove me home. Guilt, and the fear of being driven to confession, always stopped me short of objecting to her description of my status. I never argued the point with her, but abstained from compounding my mistake with a repeat performance. My behaviour remained totally above-board despite the jokes of my older escorts, who tried to make me believe that virginity was completely passé. "You must be the only virgin over 18 left in Egypt," they chided, or "won't that husband of yours be surprised on your wedding night! He will think there was something wrong with you."

One particular morning, I pushed my luck and arrived long after the milkman. Maman was already awake and caught me at the door. She was about to call the police, she said. She wanted to know exactly where I had been. Could I tell her about the picnic in the desert, the alcohol flowing, the lamb roasting, the hashish smoking? I thought not.

"I met Colonel M at a party, and he said he has known you ever since you worked the cabarets," I blurted, hoping this preposterous lie would detract her attention from my real activities. Her hand, which was about to grip my elaborate hair-do, froze in

mid-air, and she gaped at me, aghast. “The colonel is a friend of your father, and knew me long before I married. How could he say such a thing?” I had picked the colonel at random, probably because I had seen him recently and he had seemed like a good candidate for my purpose. I certainly did not expect him to be on talking terms with my parents. My heart sank when Maman announced that she would challenge his statement publicly. This kind of behaviour was right up her alley. Why she never did is a mystery, but for years I added to my prayers a special one concerning the colonel's disappearance from the face of the earth.

Every now and then, news of Alain reached me. I worried that I may have hurt his ego. I had easily convinced myself that he harboured no deep feelings for me but I knew that I had dealt a blow to his pride. Soon after our falling-out, he took up with a married woman and began to gain weight. He was losing his looks, and I no longer felt a pang when I saw him from afar. Leaving him, I had regretted parting from one so handsome. Now I congratulated myself. Since life has its own ironies I had the chance to meet him again thirty years on. He was a portly gentleman who had succeeded in business beyond anyone's imagination. We spent an evening together, mainly for old times' sake. The experience confirmed my negative impressions and probably his as well, bringing closure to an episode of our hopeful youth that had begged for a proper conclusion. We were definitely not meant to be together.

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There was a darker side to the fun world of the adults, though, and in all honesty I wanted no part of it. I was already in a great deal of trouble with the Nino episode; that, however, was not the only reason of my disquiet. I craved good times, but had no wish to partake in dangerous endeavours. I neither wanted to do drugs nor to become a hopeless drunk, so when I met Lucas, I was quite happy to find a new outlet through which to channel my nocturnal energy. Lucas was around 35, a good age for a regular boyfriend. He was Greek, but had gone to university in England – not Oxford, to his great chagrin, but another “good” school, the name of which he refused to disclose. He was a hopeless snob without the credentials to justify the posturing, but at first I found his attitude endearingly naïve.

His parents were divorced, and his father was busy drinking himself to death in South Africa while his mother lived in the United States with his two sisters. He had remained in Egypt, working on some sort of secret wiretapping system for the government and looking after his bedridden grandmother. He drove a convertible Raleigh with a wooden dashboard and made up for his rather diminutive size with a display of aggressive behaviour. I cannot say that we were ever in love. Rather, we sparred like two fencing partners who could not tell when the game was over. Lucas only went out when he was sure that the place would be frequented by the elite, and that he would therefore have a chance to be noticed by “the people who count.”

By this time, Farida was old enough to double date with us. She was so strikingly beautiful that Lucas always insisted that she come along. People would always turn and stare when she walked in. Once, however, Lucas got more than he had bargained for. It was the beginning of summer and we decided to spend the evening at the Mena House garden nightclub. As soon as we arrived, Lucas spotted the Greek ambassador at the table next to the one he had reserved for us. After we had sat down and ordered, he went to

pay his respects and when he returned he was positively glowing. "Tell your sister and her friend that they have to behave, because the ambassador will be looking our way," he whispered. Samir, my sister's escort, had a particularly sonorous laugh. Overhearing Lucas, he offered us a sample of his famous outbursts. Lucas cringed visibly and from then on the evening went downhill. My sister and Samir staged a mock quarrel, which involved audible hissing and pretend slapping; seeing Lucas blanch, I decided to join in. Ours was by far the noisiest table in the place. Finally, unable to contain himself, Lucas asked for the bill and firmly suggested that we drive to the foot of the Pyramids. As we sat in the car having a shouting match, the other two went for a walk.

A few minutes later they were back, escorted by a member of the vice squad. I knew at once what the problem was, having been a frequent victim of such interference when Alain and I went for drives on the Maadi Corniche. Even the king had not been immune to their unwelcome attention, and it was rumoured they had caught him one day with his trousers around his ankles. Horrified at their mistake, they had not become more lenient for all that. I knew that if we did not think fast we would end up at the police station, where my father would be invited to come collect us – a reminder of my sisters' wildest nights, and not a prospect I could contemplate with any measure of equanimity. We began a protracted discussion with the enforcer of morality, who had been joined by a comrade from the police van, and finally managed to convince them not to take my sister with them. We would drive to the police station with her in our car, and they could follow us. The police station they had in mind, sadly, was the one in the square off our street. Even if my sister was sent home in the end with an apology, one of the officers was liable to try to win points with my father by recounting the whole shameful incident.

We drove off, so slowly that we were overtaken by the ambassador's car. There was our saviour, I thought, and quickly exposed my plan. "Never," said Lucas, "not even if you beg me on your knees." I had my answer ready. "Look here," I said coldly. "If you don't do as I say, you will be arrested with us and they will find out that you a Christian go out with good Muslim girls. The police are not partial to that kind of arrangement. They will keep you at the police station, and guess who is going to have to pull strings to get you out? Besides, think of your position with the government." I was so convincing that in no time Lucas had caught up with the ambassadorial automobile. My sister was swiftly transferred, and delivered safe and sound to our doorstep. Realising that they had lost their prey, the police abandoned the chase.

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With such exciting adventures, I was getting rather bored with the numbing routine of my work. If I could have so much fun outside the office, why not try to enliven the workplace, I thought. I began to tease one of my male colleagues, an unattractive Catholic Copt, who seemed to embody the stereotype of the Egyptian government employee: stooped, bespectacled and subservient. Since my arrival, he had been eyeing me from behind his thick glasses. I knew that he had been married for 15 years and that his mousy wife was pregnant for the first time. He kept telling all and sundry that he went to mass every morning before coming to work to thank God for the miracle. It would be fun, I decided, to see how far he was prepared to go. I led him on and when he became insistent, informed him that he could have nothing before he divorced. I never stopped to think what would have happened had he agreed. As things turned out,

after much soul-searching, he told me sheepishly that he could not find it in himself to leave his pregnant wife. Instead of being relieved, I became incensed at this little man's refusal to give in to my powerful charm. That I had not succeeded in conquering my worldly father was one thing, but resistance from this unfortunate representative of the male species was a bit much. I made a scene in front of everybody in which I explained to him in the greatest detail that, when one had so few physical and intellectual assets to boast about, one should be overwhelmed to have been noticed at all. I don't think that he took my legitimate criticism as kindly as he should have. I suspected that my interest had led him to entertain delusions of grandeur. The whole thing was a rather sorry affair, but at least I managed to burst his balloon.

Returning to work after such an eruption was out of the question, and my career as a travel adviser thus ground to an abrupt halt. A couple of years later, I saw the man's wife with a delightful little girl and was quite happy that things had turned out that way. The punishment for my thoughtless game could have been much more damaging for everyone around, and me in particular. Fancy being saddled with such a troll!

The morning after my disgraceful display, I woke up in an excellent mood. No permanent damage had been done. Deep down, I was miffed not to have scored better and my self-esteem had indeed taken a thrashing, but I was not in a state to beat my breast over it. The only thought that struck me was that now I was completely free, and a long pleasant summer in Alexandria beckoned.

The season was late getting off to its usual joyful start. Many people we knew were worried about the path the Revolution was taking. Would-be emigrants became more numerous, especially Christian families who had sons liable to be called up for military service. Many youngsters had already left, among them Wilma, who had enrolled at the Translation School in Geneva. The new crop of revellers were more my sister's age than mine and it was her turn to get in trouble with my mother while I stayed home reading a novel a day and trying to forget that I would soon be called upon to find a new job.

Lucas made a sudden reappearance: he missed me and wanted to give our relationship one more chance. I was rather surprised, because there had been little love lost between us and I had thought he was as happy as I to call it off. He came to visit one day and seemed awed by the house. "People like you should not live in a house like this," he said – further proof, if any was needed, of both his snootiness and lack of tact. "And why not?" I asked rather aggressively, knowing full well that he meant Egyptians had no right to live in houses that had been vacated or sold by foreigners in a hurry after 1956. "This house must have belonged to a British family," he argued, sounding almost self-righteous. "They were Greek," I countered "and they had to leave because of some unwholesome financial operations that, if discovered, would have landed them in jail for a long time."

Since I suspected Lucas was a government spy, whose assignment might be to attract the authorities' attention to old-regime families who were not living under the poverty line, as had been intended, I wondered for a while what he was aiming at, and if he was trying to make me talk in order to enliven his reports to whomever it concerned. But Lucas was simply ruffled by the advantage of wealth he believed I had over him; he took me to meet all the rich Greek families that he could think of to show me that he,

too, was used to moving in exalted circles. With the expatriates' exodus, the Greeks had become, for a while at least, our foreign elite. I hated these visits, during which the hosts openly commented on me in their native language (I understood enough to follow the drift of the conversation, but was not fluent enough to give them a piece of my mind), and we regularly quarrelled following our forays into a world that interested me so little. We each had sulking days, but he invariably came back, acting as if I had begged him to do so.

One evening he called me and asked me to get ready for dinner. "Wear something elegant and sober," he said, "We will be meeting my British boss." I was curious to see what a Briton was doing in Egypt at a time where they were scarcer than tulips on the Agami beach, so I obeyed meekly.

The boss was a nondescript young man, undoubtedly a minor representative of the firm for which Lucas worked unless he too was a spy. We went to dinner at the Santa Lucia, and it soon became obvious that my boyfriend wanted to boast about the rich heiress he was dating. I found the whole scene distasteful, not least because my family's wealth was no more than a figment of Lucas's imagination and a dangerous topic to boot. I did not mind lying through my teeth to achieve an aim, but I became fiercely honest when I could see no immediate benefit to the performance. I therefore insinuated that since Abdel-Nasser had helped himself to the largest chunk of our cake only crumbs were left. Maybe I could draw him out and understand what his game really was.

To annoy my unpleasant date further, I suddenly announced that I was going to Agami. "I feel like dancing tonight," I added coyly, looking at the boss in the hope that he would be enlightened to the fact that I was not enjoying their whispered asides. I had not even been able to comprehend if they were spying on or for the Egyptian government. Not that I would have wanted to do something about it if they had, but wouldn't it have been more exciting than their mumbled exchange regarding telephone poles? Had he been involved in some illicit activity, Lucas would have acquired an extra dimension that he sorely lacked; but no such luck. The boring boss immediately signalled for the check and leapt to his feet. "We are coming too," he said. Maybe I could make Lucas jealous by flirting with him, I thought. It might bring a little life to this tedious evening. Lucas's car was quite sturdy and staunchly withstood all the potholes that studded the way to Agami. I was deprived of the pleasure of watching the two men crouch under the car in their Sunday best. We arrived in no time.

The Agami Palace was ablaze with lights and the music was deafening. On the open-air dance floor, tanned bodies jostled for an extra inch of space. Tables and chairs surrounded the arena where young men and women performed their war dances clad in minimal attire. As usual, the spectators formed a thick and prohibitive wall, signalling to the newcomer that he should think again before pushing forward. This was the highlight of the week, the venue where everyone needed to be seen. A well-stocked bar, set apart under a pergola, and a rowdy band were the only necessary ingredients to make every Saturday night a unique event. During the height of the season, the programme featured the very popular Miss Agami contest and several dance competitions that attracted teenagers from Cairo and Alexandria. A few lucky ones spent the whole summer in Agami, and their golden tans and messy, sun-bleached hair singled them out at once. Girls who won the Miss Agami competition became popularity queens for

the year, invited everywhere and allowed to behave as if they had just been selected to participate in the Miss Universe contest.

As the bleak years of the Revolution rolled over us, however, ever fewer foreigners conformed to the canons established by the Miss Agami jury. Tall blondes with blue eyes were becoming a rare commodity and Egyptian girls were not used to exhibiting themselves in public, an act that would have provoked malevolent gossip. Besides, brunettes were not yet in fashion. The atmosphere was becoming noticeably more conservative with the establishment of a bus service opening all secluded beaches to the general public and ugly rows were now taking place frequently. Bikinis were giving way to one-piece swimsuits and many of the most beautiful young women of the season abstained from entering the beauty contest, fearing severe criticism from their friends and relatives for acting provocatively at a time when their class was the prime target of the new regime's punitive measures. Thus did an event that represented the apogee of the Alexandrian summer for many years fade away entirely.

This particular Saturday offered nothing special and it was quite late when we attempted to find a relatively safe spot in which to leave the car. One could easily emerge at three or four in the morning to find one's vehicle so deeply mired in the shifting sands that it took serious manpower to get it out. The place seemed packed, as usual. Young Bedouins ran back and forth helping (or so they wanted people to believe) with the parking. They also volunteered information about the availability of tables inside. They always seemed rather doubtful and offered to interfere with a maitre d' of their acquaintance, a proposal no one took seriously. Lucas was reluctant to go any further. We had come so far, I argued, we were not going back; to make my intentions even clearer, I left the men to deal with distributing tips to the half dozen boys and girls who had suddenly materialised and walked towards the hotel. The crowd was so thick inside that it took us a minute to realise we would not even be able to stand at the bar. I was perfectly aware of the ludicrous sight we presented: Lucas and his boss, resembling tax collectors in dark business suits and attaché cases, and I in a rather elegant turquoise Chinese sheath and high heels, trying to push our way through a crowd clad in slinky Capris and bikini tops, faded jeans and rawhide sandals.

Lucas always became embarrassed and sulky when he was not immediately welcomed deferentially in a public place. He thought quite highly of himself, as most short men do. "Let's go," he urged. "You go," I urged back, "I am staying." The boss was not sure whom to follow, and stood staring at his patent leather shoes, now covered in the moist white Agami sand. Suddenly, a tall bald man rose and offered us a place at his table. "No thank you, we are going," said Lucas. "Yes thank you, we would love to sit with you," I said. Chairs were brought and glasses placed before us. The scotch bottle went around, followed by the ice bucket. Suddenly everything had become easy. "Do I know you?" asked our providential host. "How should I know? You are the one who asked us to sit down," I retorted briskly. Watching Lucas from the corner of my eye, I could see that he was having trouble containing his temper. I smiled brightly at the man. "Actually, you do. You used to date one of my sisters when I was quite young. You had a red car." This apparently sufficed to jolt his memory. "Of course," he said. "How clever of you to remember. You were quite an ugly child then. You've changed quite a bit," he added, surveying me openly. I did not think it was nice to tell him that he had changed too, and for the worse, if only because he had lost most of his hair: after all, he was kindly sharing his table with perfect strangers.

Instead, I kept the mild exchange of sweet and sour remarks going, just to peeve Lucas and prevent the man from regretting his generous offer.

I succeeded beyond expectation: Lucas disappeared with his boss, leaving me stranded in Agami. "Don't worry," said my new mentor. "I'll take you home myself." He was called Henry, a name I had so far associated with faithful English butlers, and he was far too old for me to consider anything beyond a ride home. He seemed of the same opinion and delivered me safe and sound to my doorstep as the muezzin was calling the faithful to dawn prayers. A few days later, he called. We were having homemade potato crisps for dinner and I had no intention of missing out. He was therefore told that I was not home. He called again the following week and was given the same message. It went on for a while, with the same negative result. I had decided that I really did not like him very much.

Returning from the movies one afternoon, I found him sitting on the terrace with my father. He rose as soon as he saw me: "Come on, we are going to be late, you don't need to change," he said, grabbing my arm. I did not want to make a scene, so I followed him. "Don't make me look like a fool," he whispered. "We will have one drink and then I'll take you home." We went to La Grenouille, a small bar in Glymenopoulo where we had arugula and fresh grilled sardines with our drinks. He told me about his life, his older brother who could not keep a job, and his mother, who had been bedridden for over ten years. He was an insurance agent for a Dutch company, but did not think that things would last. All his clients were preparing to leave Egypt and the situation was not conducive to doing business. He had no plans to go anywhere. He had remained a bachelor in order to keep his widowed mother company, and was not about to abandon her now. He spoke softly and without affectation. The bar was quiet except for some background music, and Argiri, the barman, had made himself scarce after refilling our glasses. I began to think that he was not that old. He was protective and in charge. He did not fumble for his wallet but extracted a few bills from his pocket, which he threw negligently on the bar without counting them. I liked that. We went for a ride along the Corniche and he took me home. It had been a perfectly enjoyable evening.

We went to a different bar the following evening, then to dinner at the Santa Lucia. He was the perfect companion, ordering for me and treating me with affectionate informality. He was also very witty, a trait I have never been able to resist, especially in men. We went dancing a couple of times, then he introduced me to his friends: Syrians from Aleppo, like him, and a number of Egyptian Jews who were late making final departure arrangements. They were all much older and always made a point of including me in their conversations, a little as they would have given a particularly precocious child a chance to express an opinion.

One night Henry asked me if I was in a hurry to go home. "Not especially," I told him, although I knew what to expect if my mother noticed my absence after midnight.

We drove slowly, Henry's arm around my shoulders, and he stopped in front of an old building on Safiya Zaghlul Street. He helped me out of the car and guided me toward the entrance. In the elevator, I asked him if we were going to a secret gambling joint. "No," he said, "we are going to my apartment." I panicked. We were not intimate enough for me to confide in him, but I was entirely unwilling to give him a chance to discover my secret by himself.

From extensive reading on the subject, I had gathered that virginity was not such a clear-cut state. But he was older, and probably terribly experienced. Maybe he would be able to tell. Then what? How could I be sure that he was not going to talk afterwards? Still, I was not about to disclose my inner turmoil. I admonished myself to stay calm. Some acting was required, and I found myself ready to rise to the challenge. "How lovely," I said, trying to sound as casual as possible. "I have never been in a garçonnière before." Henry hit the stop button brutally. "Say that again," he articulated, sounding rather baffled. I repeated my sentence, which, after all, was technically true. He pressed the down button. "Sorry," he said, "I don't like responsibility. I had no idea you were such a child." We did not speak on the way home and he barely said good-bye when we arrived. I was more relieved than disappointed.

The following day, he called me and asked me out again. We went to La Grenouille, to which he was obviously very attached. Once we had settled at the bar and he had ordered, he extracted a small box from his pocket and opened it. On the black velvet lay an engagement ring. "Will you marry me?" he asked. "I don't know how, I don't know when, but I want you to say yes, then we will work out the details." This was a bit too confusing. I had to put my thoughts in order. "Can you give me some time?" I stammered. "I just want an answer in principle," he said, taking my right hand and slipping the ring onto my finger. From that day on, he introduced me as his fiancée. It produced quite a stir among his crowd. Henry had never contemplated marriage. We became the most popular couple in Alexandria. Everyone wanted to check out the woman who had driven the staunch bachelor to such extremes.

Maman was livid. I could not have chosen a less suitable aspirant. He was a Christian, over forty, belonging to the despised class of salespeople, and was saddled with an infirm mother and an unemployed brother. How low could I sink? She was convinced that my choice had been guided by the intention of spiting her and belittling my family, but of course I was twenty-two and she could not do much to stop me, especially since Father refused to interfere. For the time being, however, she was going to make sure I did not have too many opportunities to meet "that awful man". She ordered everyone to pack: we were going back to Cairo at once. I had not yet decided to follow through and acquiesce to Henry's proposal, but Maman's wrath convinced me that anything was better than having to deal with her bouts of fury. I therefore decided to marry Henry. Telling him the truth would not be so tragic. After all, Alain had not been horrified and he was just a boy compared to my future husband. All I had to do was choose the right place and the right time. I left for Cairo in a buoyant state of mind. Soon I would be free and out of Maman's shooting range.

The more I thought about it, the more reasonable the idea of getting married to Henry appeared. My stepsisters had led a glamourous life far beyond the bounds of convention. They had danced the nights away with princes, shot ducks with the king, travelled abroad with tycoons (albeit ones married to their best friends) stayed in Paris at the Ritz and the Georges V, dined at the Tour d'Argent and Maxim's and seen the best the world had to offer. My own adventures had been rather sordid in comparison, providing me with precious little fun. Unlike them, I was not surrounded by a bright aura that could attract the powerful and influential. Perhaps this had to do with the different political atmosphere, but then again maybe I was simply lacking brilliance. I had never won any Miss Popularity



Engagement at La Taverna in Alexandria

contests, nor been everybody's best friend, and was quite aware that my relationships had been on a one-to-one basis and short-lived. Somewhere, I must have taken a wrong turn. Unable to make my mark among the fun-loving elites, why not accept wholeheartedly what was on offer: a nice, quiet bourgeois life?

Henry came to Cairo on weekends. We went out to small restaurants that he knew well and to the Gezira Club. I had the pleasure of introducing him as my fiancé this time, to a very miffed Lucas who went around telling everybody that I had dumped him for a geriatric. Ignoring the eyebrows raised at our age difference, I was falling in love with a man my mother's age.

When he could no longer come to Cairo because his mother had taken a turn for the worse, I went to Alexandria, where Nenna, upset by Maman's sudden decision to cut our holidays short, had remained. She was almost a recluse, thus providing me with the good excuse of bringing her the food her servant would never know how to buy. Maman was torn between her concern for her mother and her resentment at the thought that I was going there specifically to meet "him". After Nenna died, I found out that she had approved of my choice, because I was "a wild one", and only an older man would be able to control me. Anyway, had my mother not married someone old enough to be her father? I understood now why Nenna, tired as she had been, had made it a point to bake special cakes for Henry. She was giving me her blessing.

On one such trip to Alexandria, Henry took me to meet his mother. The poor woman hardly recognised anyone, not even her own sons, but when I appeared, she immediately extended her skeletal arms towards me and distinctly uttered the word *helwa* (pretty). I was overwhelmed. Was this a sign? Henry seemed to think so, and at once began

making enquiries in the building for an empty apartment. That way, he said, we would have our privacy and he would remain close to his mother. Marriage seemed far away nevertheless, and I basked in the present. Things will work out somehow, I told myself whenever I was reminded of the obstacles that we would have to overcome before reaching the shores of marital bliss.

I went back to Cairo on the desert bus after meeting my future mother-in-law for the first and the last time. As I opened the door of our house, I heard the telephone emit the characteristic trill of the long-distance call. Maman seized the receiver, fearing for Nenna. It was Henry. His mother had just passed away, and he wanted me back at once. "Over my dead body," roared Maman. "Let him find solace with one of his ex-girlfriends. I hear he has many. Go to your room. If you leave now, you will never set foot in this house again." Choking with rage, I called Henry. "Your mother is a monster," he said. He was crying. "Don't worry, she will not have things her way," he added when he had calmed down. A few minutes later he called again: a cousin of his was leaving Cairo early the next morning. He would come for me, and liberate me forcibly if necessary. I made up my mind, and told Maman that I would be leaving and had no intention of coming back. I packed a few things and sat at the window at dawn waiting for the cousin. "Remember," said Maman, "I don't want you here anymore. You are a bad example for your brother and sister."

I drove to Alexandria with the cousin and his wife. Evidently, they had not known about me and, though they did their best not to pry, it was obvious that they were dying to ask questions. I offered no encouragement. I had never seen a dead person before and I was worried about being confronted with the reality of death for the first time. I was not very anxious about my immediate future, knowing by then that Henry would provide for my material needs. After I had put in a short stint as a salesperson at La Serre, the most exclusive flower shop in Cairo, he had asked me to stop working and was giving me enough money to cover my expenses. It was an ironic quirk of fate that when my mother had met my father she had owned a flower shop in almost the same location, in partnership with the young man she had intended to marry at the time. My father had asked her to cut all ties with that part of her life and she had relinquished all her rights to the shop to get rid of her suitor, who was allegedly devastated by her betrayal. One of her favourite stories involved her erstwhile fiancé drenching in his tears the documents transferring her shares of the shop to him. I had no such trouble with my employers, who were friends first and foremost, but I took it as a celestial sign that we had both left the same line of business to get married.

When I arrived in Alexandria with the cousins, the apartment was filled with women in black and the smell of cooking. Henry's mother had been buried already and the funeral repast was being prepared. Tea and coffee were passed around. It was the end of November and the living room was cold and gloomy despite the crowd. Before I could even see my future husband, who had retired to his room, Maman called from Cairo: "Are you still a virgin?" she asked. "Because if you're not, you can be sure he will never marry you. Did you sleep with him? If you have, you can kiss your future goodbye. And remember: you can no longer come home." She was trying to sound prophetic, but merely succeeded in making me furious. "I'll check my hymen and let you know," I said as coldly as I could. As usual, with her lack of tact, Maman had scored. I had not told Henry yet, and now would certainly not be the time to quiz him on his inner feelings regarding virginity. In



With my husband (right) and brother in law

the evening, I was sent to sleep at the cousins' house, while my future sister-in-law remained with Henry and his brother Emile.

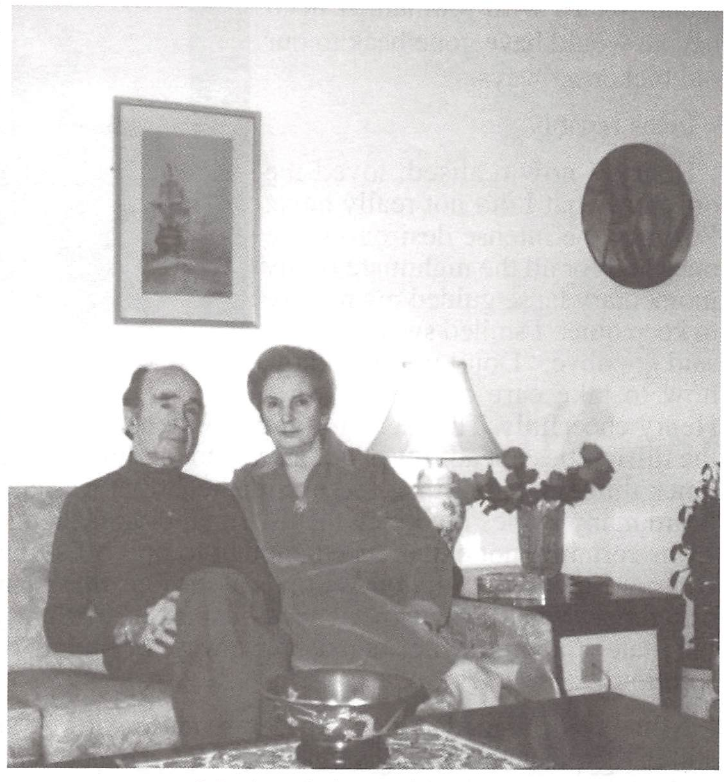
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The following day, the topic of our marriage began to take precedence over all other matters. Several members of Henry's family were priests or nuns as befitted the cousins of the Greek Catholic Patriarch. It was out of the question even to insinuate that my future husband would have to convert. It was made abundantly clear that it was up to me to relinquish my religion. "Anyway," said Rosa, my sister-in-law, brightly: "It is the same God, and I am sure that He will understand your reasons for doing it." Why He would not have understood Henry's was not explained.

I was taken to see several priests who asked me questions about holy matters. I was declared unfit to enter the church, unless I accepted to be taught by a proper Christian instructor of their choice about the fundamentals of the faith. There was a more pressing problem, however: Even if we were to marry quickly, I could not hang around the cousins' house for the duration, nor could I move in with Henry and his divorced brother. A solution had to be found, a role for which Rosa was designated. I went back to Cairo with her and she went to see Maman. They eventually reached a compromise: for appearances' sake, I would sleep at home until my marriage, on the condition that I spoke to no one and made no demands.

That suited me fine, since Rosa had taken her responsibilities seriously and had enrolled the help of a relative – a pious and prominent lady, known as a pillar of Egypt's Greek

Catholic community – to take care of my religious instruction in utmost secrecy. My parents, of course, were not to know. This great lady must have had her own doubts about the preposterous and dangerous scheme on which we were embarked, and although she kept her counsel, she received me very graciously twice a week, but never mentioned anything that was even remotely connected with my future conversion. We drank tea and chatted amiably about the people we both knew, especially a cousin of hers who had taught me economics during my senior year at AUC and was now in Senegal. Finally Henry decided that I was ready and I travelled to Alexandria to meet the priest in charge of the sacred aspects of my future life. "Why do you want to marry her?" he asked my prospective husband, quite rudely, after looking me over. "Couldn't you find a nice girl from our parish to be your wife?" A few disrespectful answers immediately popped to my mind but I thought better of it and pretended not to be there. "What is the difference between the Muslim and the Christian paradise?" the good father asked me, observing me critically over his reading glasses. I did not have a clue and politely informed him of my ignorance (I know the answer to that one now). "Exactly as I thought," he said, with bitter finality. "She is not fit to be a Christian. You cannot marry her."



My sister in law and her husband

We departed soon after the verdict, Henry muttering objectionable things against this priest in particular and the church in general. "They fully deserve what I am about to do," he told me. I was rather relieved, since the standard punishment for converting to Christianity – in other words, becoming an apostate – was death, whereas Henry only risked excommunication. As he drove me to the bus station, he was silent, seemingly deep in thought. "You know," he said suddenly, "had you not been a virgin, I would never have taken so much trouble." My heart immediately plummeted to my feet. "Why is that?" I asked, hoping that my voice was firm enough not to betray my emotions. "Because only a virgin would be fit to be my wife, and you know how rare they are these days," he answered, as if it was blindingly obvious. "You are not a virgin," I spluttered feebly. "Should I refuse to marry you? After all, virgin men are even harder to find." He guided me firmly onto the bus. "Don't try to be smart, young lady," he

said. I often wondered what would have happened if I had told him the truth then. After all, I knew I could mend fences with Maman, if need be; we would have gone back to our old bickering ways.

I was terribly

Henry, I now realised, loved me only for what I did not really have. Possibly the intense desire to solve once and for all the nightmare of my momentary lapse guided my resolve to keep quiet. I smiled sweetly as we said goodbye. "Don't worry, I know how to take care of things," said Henry cheerfully. The idea of a virgin wife had no doubt buoyed him enough to face the difficulties ahead. I was not as confident, however, and realised that I had a lot of quick thinking to do. I needed outside help, that was clear; but whom to turn to? I had heard many stories involving the use of embryonic hen's eggs and tricky positions, but I was certainly not experienced enough to pull off stunts. And I would have only one chance. I could not rely on Wilma's assertions that men were too stupid to know the difference; what if my experienced husband did? Surely, since he was fixated on the fairy tale of a virgin wife, he must have ways of finding out… I needed a truly foolproof solution.

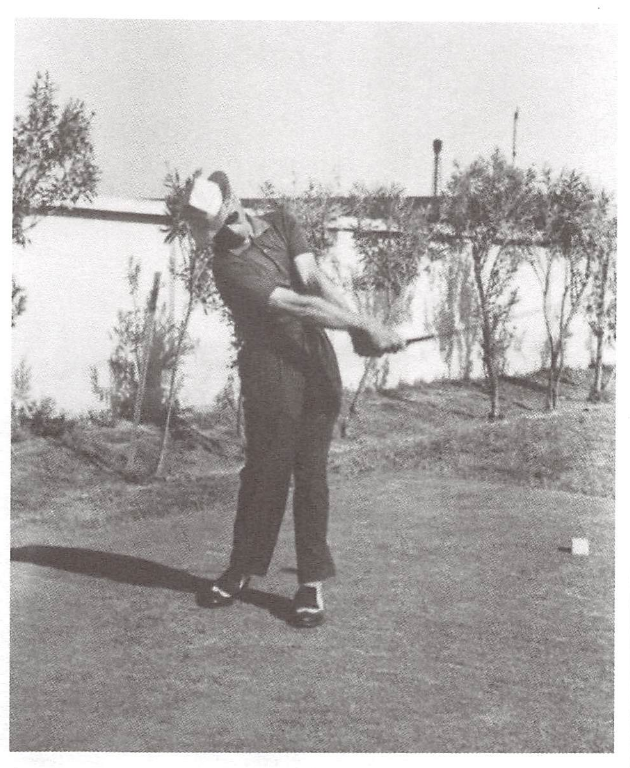


My American sister in law and her husband

As the bus chugged along the desert road, I reviewed all the people I knew who were still in Egypt and likely to give me useful advice, but also to keep completely quiet about it. And then it struck me: only my mother could be trusted. If she refused to help me, I might not marry Henry, but she would know and I would finally be relieved of my burden. If, on the other hand, she agreed, I could count on her never to breathe a word to a living soul. My mother was strong as a rock and fierce as a tigress where our basic interests were concerned. I went home and waited for the opportune moment. She listened in silence then said: "So I was right; you are no better than his daughters. It must be in the blood." She seemed to reflect for a moment and then asked: "Are you sure you want to marry this man? You don't have to, you know."

For the second time, I was being offered a way out. I thought of Henry's selfishness, of my suspicions that he was seeing someone when I was in Cairo, and of the fact that his love for me stemmed from his attachment to a myth I had come to find extremely distasteful. I became giddy at the possibilities of a life without him. I was aware even then that I was exchanging one prison for another. Henry had very firm ideas as to a wife's duties: they began and ended with making him comfortable and content… But then I also knew my mother well. Once the danger of losing me to someone else was removed, she would revert to her old ways, treating me like an unruly teenager and accusing me of plotting against her with my siblings every time we had a private conversation. She would accuse me of being a slut, of disgracing my father's house by my mere presence. I was almost 23, and she had so far imposed a curfew which, when

transgressed, entailed unpredictable retributions. If I did not go now, I would remain an ageing child all my life. "Yes," I told her firmly, "I want to marry him." From then on, Maman took charge. Oddly, she became much nicer, took me shopping and made no more comments about my genetic looseness. I was grateful to her and therefore restricted my trips to Alexandria. Now that I realised that I was going to marry Henry, I was no longer as keen to be with him. Nenna was coming back anyway. It was December, and Alexandria was cold and wet. Finally, Maman informed me that she had arranged for me to have an operation, but it could only take place two days at most before the wedding. All I had to do now was set the date.



For my husband, a serious matter

Meanwhile, Henry was battling with legalities, or so he led me to believe. It was going fine, he told me several times on the telephone; I should not worry. Finally he called to say that he would be ready by the fourth of January. For some reason, he was not going to be able to spend New Year's Eve with me, however. "That doesn't really matter, though," he added. "We have a whole life before us."

Henry had warned me repeatedly that he hated jealous women, and because the secret I was keeping made me continually uncomfortable about myself, I had never objected to his need to see other women, an attitude that, he later told me, had given him the impression that I was mature and wise beyond my years – someone who would know how to put his well-being before her own feelings. Remembering what I had to do before the wedding, which I considered a supreme betrayal of the trust he had placed in me, I replied that I would be happy to remain at home for the New Year.

The day before the wedding I was taken to a clinic on Soliman Pasha Street, where a doctor who specialised in clandestine abortions as well as the kind of operation I was seeking took care of "the problem". He was the best in the field, and his clinic did not differ from any modern surgery. I had expected something out of Zola – certainly not these spic and span surroundings. From what I understood, I was neither the first nor the last to need his services and he expressed neither surprise nor curiosity. In fact, he never spoke to me, and I was out in less than quarter of an hour.



My husband (left) and his brother age eight and ten

MARRIED LIFE

Henry came in the afternoon to talk to my parents and told them that he would take me to the *ma'zoun* in the morning. He wanted the whole thing to remain a secret from his family and we would therefore go alone and use the witnesses provided by the cleric. Later we would have a reception in Alexandria and none of his relatives would need to know the details of the religious marriage.

The following morning he came for me with his brother. We drove around for a while, making polite conversation. We were heading towards the Pyramids. Finally Henry stopped the car. "Look, he said, "I have not been able to go through with it. I tried, but it is against everything I believe in. I cannot convert." It took some time for the news to sink in. I was silent. The doctor had said that I had to be married within 48 hours. "Give me the papers, Emile," Henry said. His brother handed him an envelope from which he extracted two documents. "Our marriage certificates; no one has to know how we acquired them," he said with a sheepish smile.

The plan was to tell his family that we had married secretly in a church in Shubra, while my parents would be led to believe that we had been married by a *ma'zoun* in Giza. Everyone would be happy, thinking that his or her point of view had prevailed. The marriage certificates had been purchased from a specialist and were perfectly counterfeited, complete with signatures and stamps, so I had nothing to fear. This was poetic justice, I thought. My husband was getting a fake virgin, and I was getting a forged marriage certificate. "Let us go back," I said; "they are waiting for us to start lunch."

In the afternoon, we said our goodbyes and drove to Alexandria. I slept most of the way. Whenever I woke up, it seemed to me that Henry and Emile were carrying on a conversation from which I was excluded. Someone had been taken to the airport and had departed safely. A year later I found out that my new husband had chosen the date of our wedding to coincide with the departure of his mistress, who was joining her husband in Montreal. He had driven to Cairo from Alexandria with an old love and returned less than 24 hours later with a new one. Life was good to Henry, no doubt about it. Unable to express my indignation to the culprit, I soon began to loathe his brother and accomplice. But this had not yet come to pass.

It had been agreed that we would live with Emile in his apartment, which Henry had told me was perfect for us. It was situated on the third floor of a grand old building facing a wasteland in Kom El-Dikka. Many years later, the Roman amphitheatre was excavated opposite our house. The apartment block had seen better days and was now inhabited by petty bourgeois Greek and Syrian families, too old or too poor to move to better pastures. The flat itself was dark, drab and humid. It smelled strongly of cockroach powder and stale cooking. Not exactly a palace, but the least of my worries at the time. More importantly, there was only one bathroom for the three of us and Emile's room was adjacent to ours. What kind of privacy could we hope to have? As a harbinger of things to come, my brother-in-law sat on what was to be our conjugal bed and chatted amiably. Henry made tea and sandwiches, then more tea and finally coffee. Emile brought a bottle of champagne and we drank to our health. It was almost

three in the morning when he finally decided to retire. "We have to be very quiet," Henry warned me, closing the door. "Emile is a very light sleeper."

Henry never told me if he had enjoyed his prize as much as he had imagined he would, but the next morning he was up bright and early. I felt only immense relief that it was over and mild surprise when he announced that he would skip work and take his car to the mechanic. On our way to Alexandria he had heard a sound in the motor that had worried him. Did I want to keep Emile company or come with him? Later, we could have some lunch and then he would be playing golf. In the evening he was afraid he had a poker game that he had not been able to postpone. Besides, he was still officially in mourning and it would not be proper to go dancing so soon after his mother's death.

Luckily, I already knew that my husband was not romantically inclined. Love bored him and he had no time for courtship. He had married me; that should be proof enough of his deep feelings for me. The rest was only icing on the cake, and he disliked sugar.

Of course, at the time I was not experienced enough, nor did the general moral climate encourage me, to wonder why a man of 45 who had "seen action" since he was 16, according to his own admission, so badly needed a virgin. Maman had told me that men were only interested in sex and, according to her, were always ready and willing. That was certainly not the case with my new husband. His needs were marginal at best and from the very beginning sex was rarely part of our shared activities. Guilt-ridden as I was, I was reluctant to broach the subject with him. Would he surmise that I was more experienced than I pretended to be? Would he wonder why I craved more of something I allegedly knew nothing about?

I knew full well that if I confided in Maman she would just make disparaging remarks about covert homosexuality without extending practical advice. I therefore concluded on my own that my husband was looking elsewhere for fulfilment. He had hinted from the start that he was not used to dealing with inexpert women, which I thought was rich considering the precondition he had set for marrying. I kept these thoughts deeply buried in semi-consciousness, however, and blamed myself for lacking the necessary skills and sex appeal instead. Only by listening to other women's complaints did I finally gather that sexuality was not uniformly distributed amongst menfolk, and, furthermore, that it tended to wane with age.

Once I had digested this information, I was possessed by a powerful rage against male selfishness that was to stay with me for the rest of my life. I felt cheated and waited for the day when I would exact revenge. Sadly, I never fulfilled my dream. I did not want to cheat on my husband out of misplaced pride. I considered affairs beneath me and I certainly did not plan to impose the consequences of a divorce on my family or, in time, on my children. Some thirty years later, after Henry's death, I imagined for a while that I could turn back the clock, and take advantage of my new freedom. Just then I met a younger man whom I did not utterly dislike. To help me get over my inhibitions he tactfully asked me one day why I did not want to make love. "Is it because of your age?" he snickered "You needn't worry, I am used to older women: I have been ironing out wrinkles since I was 17!" Well… If this remark failed to turn me on, it was certainly an eye opener.

Although I considered his observation rude enough to justify his burning in hell, I subscribe to a school that bars geriatrics from indulging in close encounters. Sex, I am

convinced, can only be aesthetically pleasing between two people endowed with the blessings of youth. The sights, smells and contact are right only then. In my over-ripe state, I should not have toyed with the possibilities. But there was more to life than sordid little encounters. Enjoying every day was vindication enough for past frustrations. I wished my husband peace, wherever he was, and left it at that.

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Still, there are many bitter sweet memories attached to the very first days of my marriage which I am not about to forget: spending my wedding morning with my brother-in-law for instance was not my idea of a honeymoon, so I chose to accompany my new husband to the mechanic. "I am sorry you cannot have your coffee in bed," said Henry lightly, "but Fardous is already offended at having to serve a new Madame, so we will not upset her further." Fardous had looked after Henry's mother for years and the two brothers had promised her that she could stay in their service after her death. She must have had dreams of having the house to herself with two bachelors who only came home occasionally. She had not expected this turn of events, and was quite irked by my sudden appearance on her turf.

"I promised you a honeymoon in Luxor and Aswan," my new husband began, as we settled on hard chairs on the footpath. The apprentice mechanic had gone to get us mint tea from the nearby coffee shop. "I want to run an idea by you: with the same money, we could rent a house in Agami for the whole summer season. That way, Emile would share in our happiness, and the pleasure would last much longer than ten days in Upper Egypt." Presented that way, the proposition begged an affirmative answer. The idea of having Emile stuck to us was not a pleasant one, but I had gathered that it would take more effort than I was ready to invest at that particular time to get rid of him. "How clever of you," I said. "Of course it is a much better plan."

For the rest of the winter, a routine was established. Henry went to work in the morning, came home for an early light lunch, played golf in the afternoon, and poker in the evening. If no poker game was planned, it was snooker at the Syrian Club, where we also had dinner. I could go along or stay home. At first I was happy to play golf with the women at the Sporting Club and the Smouha, but somewhere along the line I caught the flu and for some reason was unable to recover.

I was constantly exhausted. I hated the apartment, Fardous, her awful cooking, and Emile's constant presence. I began to lose weight and felt sick most of the time. I wanted to go back to Cairo. I missed my family and no longer particularly cared for my husband. He was completely self-absorbed, his conversation centering mainly on his golf score of the day, or his gains and losses at poker. I especially missed music, which Henry and his brother allowed me to listen to only with the volume turned all the way down. I had to stick the transistor radio to my ear, because they claimed that it was not proper for a family in mourning to be heard blasting the Platters and Jacques Brel. Besides, their nerves were frayed. At home, I could turn up the volume of my gramophone and drown myself in the sound. My mother, who suspected that this was a ploy to avoid having to talk to her, never objected to it nevertheless. It was a harmless habit, and she was always careful to choose her battles. Now I had to live surrounded by silence and I began to imagine that my late mother-in-law's soul was following me everywhere. Needless to say, she was no longer smiling in approval. The music problem

was never resolved: after the mourning period was over other excuses were trundled out, and I was never permitted to play my records as I liked. I became lethargic, spending the clearest part of the day reading or sleeping.

Our "honeymoon" was crowned by a lunch at home that Henry had decided to arrange for all the members of his family who lived in Alexandria. There were around 30 guests, not counting the children. He and Emile discussed the menu, never consulting me since my lack of cooking skills had already begun to undermine any chance of my earning their respect.

Among the dishes the two brothers had planned was a huge leg of pork, which, once purchased, could not be fitted into any of the oven dishes, or in the oven itself for that matter. Emile, who was our Mr Fix-it, had a ready solution: "Let's send it to the baker," he told Henry. Fardous was dispatched with the meat at dawn and told to wait for it. The roast arrived with the first guests.

I had been warned in advance against Tante Mathilde's nosiness. "Don't answer any of her questions," Henry had told me, "because she will tear you to pieces if she is given a chance. She hates young women." As soon as his aunt set foot in the house, I realised that she had a bone to pick with her nephews, not with me. How could Henry have married in a house fitted with his mother's furniture? she wanted to know. Why did he not redecorate? Did he think a young wife would be happy to live in someone else's place – especially when it was not so beautiful that it deserved to be preserved! Tante Mathilde had always warned their mother against red curtains for the dining room, but she was hardheaded and never listened to sound advice. And now she was gone and the awful curtains were still there. Did the brothers believe that I liked the décor? And why on earth was Emile still there?

To my surprise, she was extremely gentle with me. Miffed, Henry decided to steer the conversation toward the women in his family, and specifically their housekeeping prowess, no doubt intending to expose my shortcomings in that domain. Emile, he began to say, could not move out because he had to run the house. I was expecting him to explain that this arrangement had been agreed upon in view of my inability to perform the simplest household chores. That would be high treason as far as I was concerned, but he was deprived of the pleasure of shaming me publicly. Tante Mathilde forgot him and began to speak to one of her nieces, leaving him in mid-sentence. As he began carving the roast, however, she pounced again. "Why are you serving us pork?" she asked sternly. "It is very unhealthy. At your age you should be eating only lean meat." Henry joked about his pork roast being unequalled in the best restaurants and announced that he had cooked it himself. "Well, you did not do a good job of it, I can tell you," Tante Mathilde retorted. "Can't you see it is raw? The best we can hope for is worms if we eat your masterpiece. I'll spare you details of the other diseases one can catch from raw pork." She pushed her plate aside and so did the other guests. Fortunately, there were vegetable dishes to assuage the family's hunger, but Henry's feelings were hurt and he insisted on complaining to the older ladies about my limitations. Finally, Tante Mathilde looked at him coldly: "Did you want a wife or a cook? Because if it is a cook you are after, I can send you a good one, but she will probably be more arrogant and demanding than this poor child," was her parting shot.

After this debacle, for which Henry held me somehow responsible he vowed that I would take over in the kitchen no matter how much I resisted the idea. Emile did the shopping and left the bags for me every day, to deal with as I could. Obviously they were throwing me in the water in the mistaken belief that I would learn to swim. One day I was faced with veal knuckles. I knew that my grandmother used to cook them in a delicious soup, but I could hardly call home for instructions. I did not want my mother to know that I was now required to do the cooking. My grandmother's veal knuckles had been as tender as butter. How could I produce the same result with these red chunks covered in skin? There were tufts of hair still sticking to the flesh. Their sight made me feel sick. I grabbed the kitchen knife and attempted to peel the casing off. It was a gruelling task: the knife was blunt and the pieces unwieldy. When Henry arrived, there were tiny bits of raw meat all over the place. He was less than pleased, but made us sandwiches that we ate in total silence. The following day, I went in search of a basic cookbook.

I had not reckoned with the brothers' creativity. Soon after the knuckles, my brother-in-law informed me that he had purchased lobster and put it in the refrigerator. I had to cook it in a pot with onions, garlic, celery, one tomato and no water. I prepared the seasoning as told and placed the pot on the fire, then went for the lobster. It was wrapped in a towel and as soon as I touched it, it began to move. I screamed. The towel fell to the floor and the creature advanced upon me. Summoned, Fardous refused to deal with it. She slammed the kitchen door shut and told me to leave it for the *khawaga* (Emile) to take care of when he returned. Henry got back first. The whole house had filled with smoke and at first he thought that there was a fire. Fardous and I, locked in the bedroom on the other side of the apartment, had been oblivious to the burning pot. I was proving more than Henry could handle, and for a while Fardous was asked to take over where she had left off before the brothers' foray into the realm of haute cuisine. Watery stews and sticky rice were better than my wasteful attempts (and theirs). She acquitted herself of her duties in the worst possible way, and I stopped eating anything cooked at home.

The situation was compounded by a different attitude toward bread. At home, we had never been encouraged to stuff our stomachs with bread. "There is enough good food to fill you up without the extra empty calories," my mother used to say. In my husband's family, on the other hand, it was considered a sin to eat anything without bread. Leaving some was equally offensive, although in a minor way. Henry had often remarked on the tiny amounts of bread I normally consumed. Now that Fardous's cooking was disagreeing with me so virulently, I was going through a whole pita loaf with lots of butter instead of my regular meal. But this too was deemed unacceptable. Eating butter in such quantities was unhealthy let alone expensive. I was advised to dunk my bread in some sauce if I insisted on eating nothing else. I therefore decided to go on a hunger strike.

In the end, annoyed at my despondency, my husband took me to a doctor he knew. My lack of enthusiasm for marital life was caused by some pathological complaint, he had come to believe. I was given a general check-up. I felt terrible at giving him so much trouble, but on the other hand I could not find the energy to go on. No, I was definitely not pregnant, the doctor decreed in response to Henry's question; nor could I ever be, without an operation. Even then, he was doubtful that I could ever conceive. Did my mother have trouble getting pregnant? I recalled that she had indeed told me about visiting

several doctors, and trying for over two years before succeeding. The practitioner nodded wisely. "In your case, it is more serious, and if you are thinking of emigrating, I would suggest that you consider adoption in the future." I was rather reassured. I could feel no maternal chord vibrating and a child was really the last thing I needed, I thought. I just wanted the doctor to prescribe a hasty return home. I had some extra tests and was declared chronically anaemic. The treatment, injections of some sort, added to my misery. I began to throw up around the clock. Maybe my husband would understand that it was all a mistake and send me packing. If he did, he kept his sentiments hidden. Instead, he behaved as if everything were perfectly normal, only making sure that there was a bathroom handy wherever we went.

My sister-in-law came from Cairo to visit. She opened my wardrobe and exclaimed at the scantiness of my trousseau. "Your parents must have been glad to get rid of you so cheaply," she said with a laugh that she thought blunted the edge of her nasty remark. "Was she a genuine virgin at least, Henry?" My husband confirmed that I was indeed the real thing, and his sister thanked God for small mercies. Other visits by his relatives were almost all as unpleasant. After the disastrous lunch, they felt justified in giving me advice and it was decided that I had to be taken in hand. My sister-in-law, worried about her brothers' well being, pulled Wadia, their old Syrian cook, out of her retirement. She came by every day, for a fee, to teach me the rudiments of housekeeping and cooking. I remember a particular instance when, with Emile in attendance, she stood by the bedroom door and asked me to make the bed. She undid it and forced me to make it over, seven times, until they were both satisfied. It took a long time because I had to interrupt myself every two minutes to run to the bathroom and be sick. Ironing was another beastly task that I never mastered. As for darning, it took treasures of cunning to get rid of torn socks before they were brought to me with the thimble and darning egg to help me while away the hours during the long afternoons when my husband was busy playing golf.

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Wadia came with us to Agami in the summer. The wonderful celebration of sun and sand for which I had given up the trip to Luxor and Aswan was not to be as heavenly as promised, at least not for me. Every morning Henry and Emile went to the beach and I stayed with my teacher to pound the meat of the *kubeba*, roll vine leaves and stuff various vegetables, chop *mulukhiya* and make the pastry for *sambusek*. In the evenings after cooking the various hot mezze, I stayed up, but out of sight, to serve the men playing poker. We had houseguests all the time and I was in a constant daze. The only dish I ended up mastering that summer was the raw *kubeba*, which demanded only enough skill to dose the proportion of bulgur to minced meat without using scales. I developed the right "feel" for it. In those days, Agami featured neither running water nor electricity nor was there a shopping centre close by. That my trials were invariably consigned to the garbage bin became even more of an issue in view of the difficulty of conserving and cooking food under these circumstances.

Several years later, when we were living in Australia, a discerning friend sat with me in the kitchen as I was preparing a meal: "You are the best cook I know," she told me, "because you never bother with the hocus pocus of the trade. You make it look so simple." That during our years in self-imposed exile, I cooked and sold ready-made

meals to make ends meet is proof that anyone can learn anything if given enough incentive. Clearly, that first summer of togetherness in Agami, I did not have any.

Once, my sister-in-law came to spend the weekend with her husband and their two sons and, seeing that I was in no state to function, let alone prepare an impromptu repast for so many people, she took over the kitchen with Wadia. Suddenly her youngest son, then 13, who had been sulking in a corner since his arrival, stood up: "You are so lazy it is disgusting," he hissed at me. Then his voice rose: "Get off your behind and go help my mother. She is not here to serve you. You know what they say about you in my family? They say you think you're a princess, too good to act like a real wife, and that my uncle made the biggest mistake of his life when he married you. If you can't move, and are just so helpless, why don't you just go away?" The little beast was quite indignant. But he was right. I had been thinking about it all along, I just could not quite find the energy to actually up and go. Now I would have it. My husband looked dumbstruck. "You heard your nephew, now take me home," I said quietly. "I am not happy, you are not happy; you and I know that we were happier before," I added. This must have shamed Henry, because he suddenly leapt into action and sent his nephew out of the room. He said that he understood I was sick and not myself and promised that he would take me to another doctor in Alexandria; if I could not be cured at once, then we would go to Cairo to seek advice.

"No, you don't understand," I said coldly. "I don't like my life, I don't like having to ask you for money as if you were my father, I hate your house, I hate living with your brother and I also hate your maid, who hates me back. I just don't want to stay. As soon as you take me to Cairo, I will recover." A grand scene followed, with the whole family, including Wadia, chipping in. Alex, my sister-in-law's husband, took advantage of the situation to expose his own grief against his wife's family. He advised Emile to move out and Henry to get rid of that maid, who was much too impertinent to be any good. Besides, he had always suspected her of being a thief. He had not wanted to say anything, but now… a story of disappearing pounds followed. Wadia dredged up the nastiness inflicted on her by Henry's mother in 1949, when she had come to Egypt from Palestine as a refugee. Everyone was shouting at the same time. It was rather confusing: I did not know if they agreed with my behaviour or believed that I was a brat. Nor did I care. I went to throw up.

I am not sure how or when it ended, but I can remember my mother and brother showing up suddenly on our doorsteps: they had arrived from Cairo at the most unpropitious moment for an impromptu visit and probably inquired about the commotion. I was in the bathroom throwing up and did not witness their entrance on the scene but heard them being told there and then that I was not worthy of Henry. "I'll take her back," said my mother at once. My sister-in-law then reproached her for not having taught me to cook, to which my mother answered superbly that she had certainly not raised me to marry a loser, a man who could not afford proper servants. Eventually, everyone calmed down and returned to Cairo, leaving me with Henry, Emile and Wadia, who obviously had not had enough. They kept trying to tell me how I should go about mending my ways. It was not really my fault, they commented charitably; they even admitted that they had been unfair, for I was too young and inexperienced to be proficient in the essential arts that were passed from mother to daughter in their family. I had not had the benefits of a proper education at home, what with my mother acting snootily



Bored at the Syrian club during a Snooker tournament

and despising good housewives, who were the salt of the earth. Maybe it was a matter of religion, ventured Wadia, who wanted them to know that she had not been fooled by their silence on the matter. Henry shut her up at once, and hastily concluded that all they asked of me was that I concentrate on learning.

Wadia, who did not speak French, was demanding simultaneous translation from the brothers, who had to interrupt their diatribe to oblige. "You see," interjected Emile wisely, "a woman does not need university degrees" – he had never managed to get one himself; "she needs to know how to mend her husband's socks lovingly and make him a hearty meal." Emile always did love his food.

His wife had not been up to his standards either, and he had divorced her and left her to raise their only daughter. Did I want this to happen to me? he asked, certain that any female in her right mind would consider divorce the ultimate punishment. "Yes," I screamed, "I didn't leave with my mother and brother because I didn't want to shame you in front of your family, but I am leaving first thing tomorrow. You can stuff your lousy certificate. I don't even need to be divorced since I have never been married." This last bit remained untranslated. For Wadia, a devout churchgoer, any clarification would have meant that I was living in sin and she would not have wanted to spend one more minute under our roof. She had raised a point that I had not thought of so far, however: was I being coerced into accomplishing the chores that I abhorred because I was a Muslim, or to get back at my parents who had been less than joyful at the

prospect of my marriage? I did not really think so, but decided to observe my husband's attitude more closely from then on and make a note of any critical remarks concerning my parents in particular and Muslims in general.

The following day, Henry insisted that I see another doctor. I was suffering from depression, he explained, but in this day and age it was curable and was no worse than a bout of flu. As soon as we entered the surgery, the doctor congratulated me. Since I thought that he was referring to our marriage, I murmured half-hearted thanks. How many months? he asked. Six, I told him. "You look much too skinny, are you sure?" he inquired. "Are married people supposed to put weight on?" I wondered aloud, rather stupidly. "Only women, and only when they are pregnant," the doctor informed me gently. It was obvious that he thought he was dealing with someone mentally challenged. I was happy to share with him the diagnosis of the first doctor I had seen. He was not impressed. A quick examination confirmed his prediction. I was shattered. Going home alone and divorced was one thing. Doing the same with a child was simply not on. Neither my mother nor my ageing father needed this extra aggravation.

Henry was as overjoyed as I was chagrined. He had always wanted a child, but had not dared to say so after the first doctor's verdict. He called all the members of his family in Cairo and Alexandria as well as all his friends to share the good news. It was going to be a boy and he would call him Manuel, after his favourite bullfighter.

Henry had ignored my indisposition so far. Now he woke up in the middle of the night to make me lemonade or tea when I was sick. He called the doctor twice a day to find out what I should eat and drink. We were referred to a gynecologist who eventually became a great friend. Regardless of all the brouhaha, I was relieved to know what had



With my husband at the Alexandria Sporting Club

been wrong with me. Maybe I did not hate Henry after all, although my resentment toward his family did not diminish. Following the doctor's advice, I asked Henry if I could not go to work with him. He agreed wholeheartedly, and now I had some money to do with as I pleased. I used it to bribe Fardous, who quickly changed her tune - so much so, in fact, that Emile was piqued when she refused to serve him. "I am too busy looking after Madame," she told him self-righteously. "She is pregnant, you are not." He was so enraged that he fired her. The next maid that we hired had no pretensions to run the house and was quite happy to do the work under Wadia's supervision. Now that I was a working woman, I was not required to mend socks and make beds. Things looked up. And then Marcelle appeared on the horizon.

Marcelle was a beautiful woman, a couple of years younger than my husband and therefore old enough to have been my mother. She was Jewish and a professional woman, although I never managed to discover what her profession was. She had been married to the owner of one of the largest department stores in Cairo. The couple had one daughter that Marcelle relinquished to her husband when she left him for a handsome Egyptian officer who dumped her in turn as soon as she obtained a divorce. She then married an Englishman and moved with him to some African country, where he drank himself literally to death. She seemed to consider herself "between marriages." I was awed by her worldliness when I first met her, and quite envious of her appearance. She was always polished and impeccably groomed, while by this time, I was beginning to be afflicted by the visible unpleasantness accompanying pregnancy. I had not gained enough weight to flaunt my abdomen, but my body was no longer shapely. My hair was a disaster and my makeup refused to stay where I had originally applied it.

I really did not need the competition, especially since Marcelle was skilled in more than one field. Her apartment was beautifully decorated and she hastened to inform us that she had upholstered the couch and sewn the curtains herself; she was an excellent cook, but was also well read and politically savvy. She was everything that Henry had hoped for and more. Normally, I should have been relieved and left him to her. I discovered, however, that I had a very competitive nature. If she wanted Henry, I was going to fight for him. I suddenly stopped throwing up and my bouts of fatigue lessened considerably. I was out every night with my husband, as Marcelle could be counted on to "bump into" us wherever we went.

I began to suggest the most outlandish destinations for dinner. We had quail and spicy Syrian sausages in the old-clothes dealers' square, and there was Marcelle having the same with Henry's best friend; we met them at Abu Qir where she said she had wanted to try the lobster; at the Santa Lucia eating the special octopus salad; at the Elite for pasta and at the Union for rice and chicken livers. She never missed us, and I could only deduce that my husband was informing her of our whereabouts in some mysterious way – perhaps telepathically, since I often changed destination at the last minute, hoping to lose her. She became an obsession, especially when she took to coming to our apartment for breakfast every morning, bearing hot rolls. Officially, she was going out with Henry's best friend, then seemed to trade him for Emile, but any casual observer would have noticed that she felt mild sympathy for them at best. On the other hand, she pretended to be passionately interested in the future baby and me. Her own daughter was now 20. She was sorry she had missed out on her childhood years. She often wondered aloud if it was too late for her to have another child, but then would say that

she intended to share mine. Would I let her? We went shopping for baby clothes together and she promised to find me a nanny at least for the first months, until I learned to care for my child by myself.

I had never given the baby much thought, but now I began to fret. Would it be a boy? A girl? Did it make any difference? Would it be normal? My family was healthy, and so was Henry's, as far as I could tell: not very good-looking in general, but definitely free of obvious genetic diseases. I'd tell myself everything would be all right, and then suffer new bouts of anxiety. My mother came to visit and met Marcelle. "You have to get rid of this woman," she told me as soon as we were alone. "I don't like the way she looks at you. She will bring you bad luck. What is she doing in Egypt anyway? She might be a spy."

In these years everyone saw spies, whether aliens or the homegrown variety, everywhere. Some were working for the government, reporting on normal citizens' negative attitudes, or secret intentions to transfer their capital abroad and leave the country clandestinely. Others were said to be working against the government and in the employ of foreign powers, namely Israel. Marcelle could be either, my mother mused, but she was dangerous in any case. "I would not say anything compromising in front of her, if I were you," she warned me seriously. The Mukhabarat were interrogating many people we knew; others had disappeared and it was whispered that the jails were full of "political" prisoners who were being tortured, sometimes to death. It had become in poor taste to ask about someone who had suddenly stopped being seen on the golf links or at the Syrian Club. If by chance he reappeared, his friends acted as if they had just not noticed his absence, but began keeping him at arm's length. If he was no longer in prison, then he had turned informer, was the common reasoning.

There was no shaking Marcelle, however. We were becoming known in Alexandria society as the trio, and people now extended invitations to the three of us as a unit, often making unsavoury remarks about the sultan and his harem. Unlike me, Marcelle was very curious about Henry's family. She kept asking questions about how they had come to Egypt from Aleppo, and how his father and mother had fallen in love. I heard the story for the first time and felt unfairly jealous that I had not thought of asking him first.

Henry's mother had been a hardheaded young lady, who had resisted marriage until the ripe age of 25. She had met his father at a family gathering in Aleppo and, although he was a few years younger than her, she told her family he was the only man she would marry. Until then, she had refused even to look at prospective suitors, and the family should have jumped at the chance to marry her off, but Henry's father had been deemed totally unacceptable. He was too young, already a gambler and a womaniser and, although vaguely involved in commerce, not exactly known for his diligence. Poor Marie was finally forced to marry an older man and lived with him for ten long years. She had a daughter, on whom she concentrated her energy. Then her husband died, and the widow, her small child in tow, followed her family to Egypt. By this time, Michel, Henry's father, had also moved to Cairo. The two belonged to the same circle, and their meeting was only a matter of time. Marie was now free, over thirty and not about to let this second chance escape her. Finally her parents relented and she was able to marry the love of her life.

Three children were born in quick succession, but when Henry was only two, Michel died suddenly. They were coming home in the evening from a visit to relatives that they

had both enjoyed. His laughter changed into a cough, and a moment later he was gone. Henry's mother fell into a terrible depression, akin to madness. She threw her clothes and jewelry out of the window and had to be cared for around the clock. She refused to look after her children. The large apartment where they lived in Daher was abandoned, and Marie and the four children went to live with family. She never completely recovered, however, and would periodically have a row with her hosts for no known reason and move on to another set of relatives. When the children were old enough, the girls went to board at the Sacré Coeur in Heliopolis, while my husband and his brother were enrolled in a Jesuit college in Ayn Tourah, Lebanon. When Henry, the youngest of the children and his mother's favourite, turned 16, he left school to care for her. With part of their father's inheritance she built an apartment block in Heliopolis and each child was given a floor, with Henry sharing his mother's.

Emile married a good Syrian girl whose parents had a great deal of money – a lucky stroke, the family thought, since the young man was already involved in heavy gambling and had almost lost all his share of his father's legacy. He went to work for his new father-in-law, who owned a factory in Alexandria. After the heavy nights spent drinking and gambling, he was not fit to function in the morning, and his boss, a hard worker and a self-made man, grew increasingly impatient. Finally Emile was asked to leave his job and move out of his in-laws' house, with or without his wife and baby daughter. He chose solitude, and rented an apartment. Soon after, his mother and Henry moved in with him.

Henry had been making a decent living in Cairo as a car salesman. Now, in Emile's company, he proceeded to deplete his nest egg at the casino where Emile had found a position as a croupier. A row ensued in which their mother accused them of ruining her. The two young men promised to give up their dissolute lifestyle and began looking about in Alexandria for a good investment.

There began the financial curse that followed my husband all his life. It was enough for him to decide to place his money in any successful venture for it to flounder almost immediately. He placed his money in several concerns, which all went bankrupt. He finally associated himself with three other friends and they set up an office representing several foreign insurance companies. By the time I met him, only one had survived, but it was enough to provide him with a comfortable living.

PARENTHOOD

As the time of my delivery neared, Henry began organising poker games at home almost every night. He wanted to be close to the clinic, he said, in case we had to rush. Marcelle presided in the kitchen and I acted as helper. Wadia had quit, because she hated Marcelle, telling me to give her a call as soon as "that woman of loose morals" either stole my husband or disappeared. She seemed to believe that the former was about to happen and she felt sorry for me, although she may have thought that it served me right, since I had staunchly resisted making vine leaves the way Henry loved them. (It involved stuffing them with rice, a mixture of ground beef, lamb and veal, crushed garlic and pine nuts, rolling the leaves thinly but not too firmly, and placing them in



A daughter is born and she weighs over three kilos!

a heavy-bottomed pot where they were left to simmer all night covered with broth and topped with lamb trotters.)

The first signs of my imminent delivery began in the middle of a poker game. I tried to tell Henry, but I could see he was winning. If I interrupted him now, he would accuse me of having tampered with his concentration. Henry's focus, at poker, golf and snooker, was a very important element in our lives that had to be respected and shielded from any distraction. On the other hand, I did not want Marcelle to know, lest she decide to take me to hospital herself. So I kept quiet. One of the players decided that he wanted a peeled apple just then, and I had to oblige. He must have liked it very much, because he kept asking for more throughout the evening. If only I could lie down for a moment, I would be all right,

I thought, but then Marcelle asked me to begin placing the coffee cups on trays because the players had been asking for coffee. Finally it was over. Marcelle could not make up her mind to leave and helped me clean up. She kept saying that she had a feeling something was about to happen. So did I, I wanted to scream, and was terrified that if she did not leave at once it would happen there and then in the kitchen.

I resorted to praying. "Please God make her go," I begged silently, while attempting to keep the conversation going. No sooner had we closed the door behind her than I told my husband we had to go to the clinic at once. "Not now darling, I am exhausted, but we'll do it first thing in the morning, I promise," he said in a conciliatory manner. I heard him shower and a moment later he came into the room. The pain was unbearable, but I knew it was no use pleading with him. Emile arrived to discuss the game, as was his wont. Suddenly he stopped. "Have you seen your wife's face?" he asked Henry. My husband had been dozing off while Emile droned on. He murmured something about taking care of it in the morning.

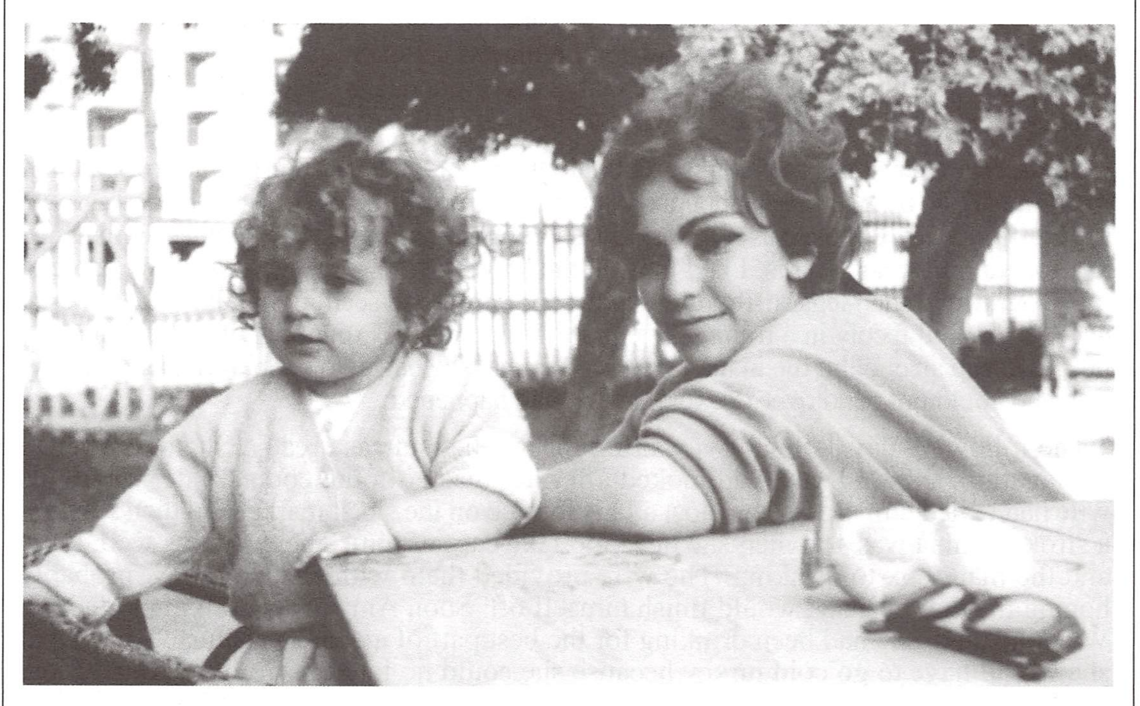
Emile was not pleased, and tried to locate my gynecologist, who was at a party, but said I should be taken to the hospital at once. He had arranged for a doctor to be waiting for us. Emile could not drive and I had passed the stage where I could reasonably be expected to. So Henry had to be shaken out of his torpor and helped into his clothes. We stopped en route to buy sandwiches and coffee, because he had suddenly become peckish. Eventually we got to the clinic and preparations were set in motion while my husband and the doctor chatted amiably about the disconcerting habit women have of giving birth in the middle of the night. From the bed on which I had been strapped in a most unbecoming way, I began calling to them that I felt the baby coming. The nurse told me to keep quiet, it was my first baby, and it would be hours before it came. Henry came to sit by the bed. He was leafing through a copy of Playboy, a forbidden publication in Egypt but which the doctor had given him to while away the hours. Henry became quite engrossed and paid me no attention, then suddenly flipped the magazine around to show me the centrefold. "Wouldn't be heaven to be married to a girl like that?" he asked me, as if I were a fellow ogler with whom he could share his lust. He seemed surprised when I told him to get out. He took the magazine and himself to the room we had reserved and completely ignored my increasingly anguished assertions that the baby was on its way.

Finally the doctor was called to give me a calming injection. It was now four in the morning and my husband needed to sleep. I was disturbing him. There was a short discussion which involved moving him to another room, away from my calls. The doctor looked at me to see if the threat was working, did a double take and leaped to the side of the bed, fumbling to put on his surgical gloves and finally throwing them on the floor. "Oh my God," he gasped, "I am so sorry." Two minutes later he had a baby by the feet, smacking it on the bottom. "It is a healthy girl, you can be proud," he added," as my daughter uttered her first cry. "That was a close call," he whispered in an aside to the nurse, who did not look happy at having been caught unprepared. I wanted to see the baby and pushed a sobbing Henry away while I got out of bed. I was a little shaky, but they let me hold her for a few seconds before taking her away. Washed and clothed, she was set in a cot next to my bed. In the next bed, my husband was observing his brand new daughter and there was so much pride on his face that I forgave him his callousness. "We will call her Manuela. Maybe

there will be women bullfighters by the time she grows up," he said, before falling back on the pillows, fast asleep.

A few hours later, at 7am, I heard Marcelle's voice berating Henry for not having called her to attend the birth. My own mother had yet to be told and I did not want Marcelle to see the baby before her. Undeterred by my reluctance, she pushed the nurses away and began to sob loudly at the sight of the baby. Finally, having dried her tears, she informed me that I should not worry about a thing. She had everything under control; she was moving in "with the boys" and would look after them until I came back. Henry thanked her and smiled gratefully. I was beside myself and when the doctor came to check on me, I explained the situation to him. He was quite understanding, having spent several evenings in the company of the infamous trio. He had watched Marcelle for some time and wondered why I had allowed matters to proceed so far, he said. He discharged me immediately and when Henry arrived, I was dressed and waiting for him with the baby and a nurse whom I had been advised to hire there and then.

When Marcelle rang the bell and pushed her suitcases in, she discovered that Emile was temporarily moving into Henry's bachelor pad (he did not know then that it was soon to become a permanent arrangement) to lend his room to the full-time nurse, and that there would no longer be any need for her. "I'll just sleep on the sofa," she said trying to look unruffled. Soon war was raging between her and Antoinette, the nurse. I was trying to breastfeed the baby, but was constantly disturbed by their arguments until one day, I woke up from a short nap to find Antoinette gone. "She was rude to me, so I fired her," Marcelle explained. I was speechless. When Henry came home she complained that Antoinette had told her she had no place living between a husband and



At the Alexandria Sporting Club playground

his wife, and that she would do better to remove herself. Henry seemed indignant and, turning to me for confirmation, agreed that under the circumstances Marcelle had every right to fire the woman.

Maids and nurses came and went. I did my best not to give my house over to Marcelle, and to form, then impose, opinions regarding the baby's welfare. It was not always easy: I was very irritable and so was she; and I could not find someone as experienced and reliable as Antoinette had been. I felt sorry for my daughter: she had an inept mother, unable to make sensible decisions or, if by chance she did arrive at a verdict, unable to implement it. I was terrified of doing irreparable harm every time I came near the baby, and generally so nervous that I had no time to enjoy mothering her. I felt I was walking on a tightrope with her in my arms: at any moment I could lose my balance and something terrible would happen.

We eventually hired an old Sudanese woman who had looked after a paralysed acquaintance of ours for years. He had just died and she was looking for a job. The daughter of Sudanese slaves who had stayed on after their master had manumitted them, she was very skinny and very neat as well as seemingly ancient. She was extremely respectful and would not have objected to Marcelle's presence had she found her in bed with Henry. She would simply have thought that he had two wives, a situation with which she was familiar. My husband actively encouraged me to give Amna a serious try. I liked her, and she was extremely skilful with the baby, but her habit of talking to us bent double in an effusive demonstration of humility disturbed me. I was used to looking people in the eye, and encountering a back every time I addressed the woman was hard to bear. We got along quite well nevertheless and, having given my daughter her last evening feed, I would quickly get ready to join Henry and Marcelle at the Syrian Club across the square. She now accompanied him when he played snooker, and followed him on the golf course when I took the baby to the club's playground. Little had been said about this strange arrangement because by now I knew it was really no use.

The Amna interlude came to an abrupt halt one night when, coming home from dinner, I was transfixed by a strange sight upon opening the front door. From where I stood, I could see the baby's cot. It looked as if it was now sporting a pair of sails. Being quite shortsighted and too vain to wear glasses, I had to walk the length of the corridor before I was able to make out two human legs stiffly raised in the air. Amna had seemingly fallen into the crib, and was flailind feebly in a fruitless attempt to right herself. I roughly pulled her out and a gust of cheap alcohol hit me in the face. Dead drunk, she began to babble when she felt my grip and could not bend over to explain what had happened.

The following day, Amna was waiting for me, her suitcase ready. She owed me an explanation, she said. She had looked after her master in the countryside, where his wife had exiled him after he had lost all his fortune on the stock market and then suffered a stroke. Amna was 15 when she began to take care of him. The evenings were long, and the man took to drinking. The wife provided them with cheap brandy, probably hoping that her husband would finish himself off. Soon Amna was drinking with him. When he died, she had been drinking for the best part of a quarter century. Afraid that she would have to go cold turkey because she could no longer afford the brandy, she tried the household alcohol with which primus stoves were lit. In our house, she had been helping herself to our bar, but she had heard me comment that the Courvoisier

had been watered down and my husband had sniffed the bottle then thrown it away. She was afraid we would find out she was an alcoholic, so she had reverted to the kitchen alcohol, buying a couple of bottles on her days off. It was such a sad story, I felt like crying. "Don't go, we will cure you," I said, aware that I was signing on for more than I could handle. But she refused. "I've tried. I can't function at all if I don't have a drink every three hours. Like your baby needs her milk, I have to have my alcohol. And without it, I am no good to anybody." All I could do was give her enough money to survive a couple of months and wish her well.

She was followed by a young woman recommended by a reputable domestic agency. Aziza was aggressively ugly and I was tempted to dismiss her at once. It was cruel, however, to refuse to hire someone under the pretext that she was so ugly she would scare the baby. In fact, she did. As soon as Manuela took a look at her she began howling. Although never a very serene baby, she managed to outdo herself on that day. Aziza sat in the vestibule sighing that her luck was *mayel* (tilting), since in order "to eat bread" she had to put up with an abnormal child. In the evening, she told me that she needed to go out to buy fresh bread. Ours was stale and she could not eat it. She was gone for several hours.

A new routine was established, with Aziza sighing by the door while I took care of the baby. She then went out in the evening, returning long after Henry had come home. "Aren't you going to inquire what she does when she goes out?" my husband asked one day. I was past caring and told him so. "Well, I am not," he said. "I am interested in who looks after my daughter." He made arrangements for his brother to wait for Aziza and follow her. Emile came half an hour later to inform us that he had followed Aziza and that she was indeed turning tricks in the neighbourhood. He had seen her climbing into a car after discussing something, probably her fee, with the driver. When she came home, Henry confronted her. She began to shriek, threatening that she would say he had tried to molest her and that the Madame liked to watch. We were no longer living under the king's rule and Abdel-Nasser had given poor people their rights. She would go to the Mukhabarat and tell them that we were spies. Let the *khawaga* dare and throw her out: he would see what would happen to him. Incensed when he saw the lights coming on in the neighbouring apartments, Henry pushed her into her room and locked her in. She kept the racket going all night. Early in the morning there were knocks on our front door. "There is a woman hanging out of your window and threatening to jump," the *bawwab* told us. "I think she's gone crazy." I went onto the balcony and saw that a crowd had assembled. Aziza was haranguing the onlookers. It was a rather tricky state of affairs and I was curious to see how my husband was going to solve it. To my utter surprise, he came into the baby's room to say good-bye. He had to go to work, an important appointment. "And what am I expected to do?" I wanted to know. "Nothing, let her jump," said my gentle husband, who proceeded to leave, taking the key of the nanny's room with him.

When I had put the baby to sleep I called the resourceful Emile and outlined the events of the preceding 12 hours. He arrived a little later in a taxi with a mattress that he and the driver placed on the footpath under the window. The crowd gasped. Some screamed it was madness; she would kill herself (we lived on the third floor). Others encouraged her to close her eyes and leap. Meanwhile Emile, who still had the key to his old bedroom, came upstairs, crept to the door, opened it and burst into the room,

grabbing the hysterical Aziza and wrestling her to the floor. He tied her to the bed and called the police.

Henry returned for lunch to find a very irate Emile. For the first time he was on my side, and shouted at Henry for leaving me alone to deal with the problem.

My husband could be quite supportive when it mattered, however. On one occasion, Manuela, only a few months old, was playing in my mother's garden in Rushdi and was superficially scratched by a cat that seemed to be an habitué of the kitchen door. I thought little of it until my mother called me a couple of days later and told me that she had found the cat dead on the lawn. "I don't want you to panic," she said, "but you need to seek a doctor's advice." It was late afternoon and Henry had just come home from the club. He immediately went back all the way to Rushdi to collect the cat's corpse, which we placed in our fridge. The following morning, he took the dead animal for an autopsy and I called the pediatrician. He was against giving such a small baby rabies shots. It was dangerous and might damage her nervous system, but that was the least of it. Other things could happen, like cardiac arrest.

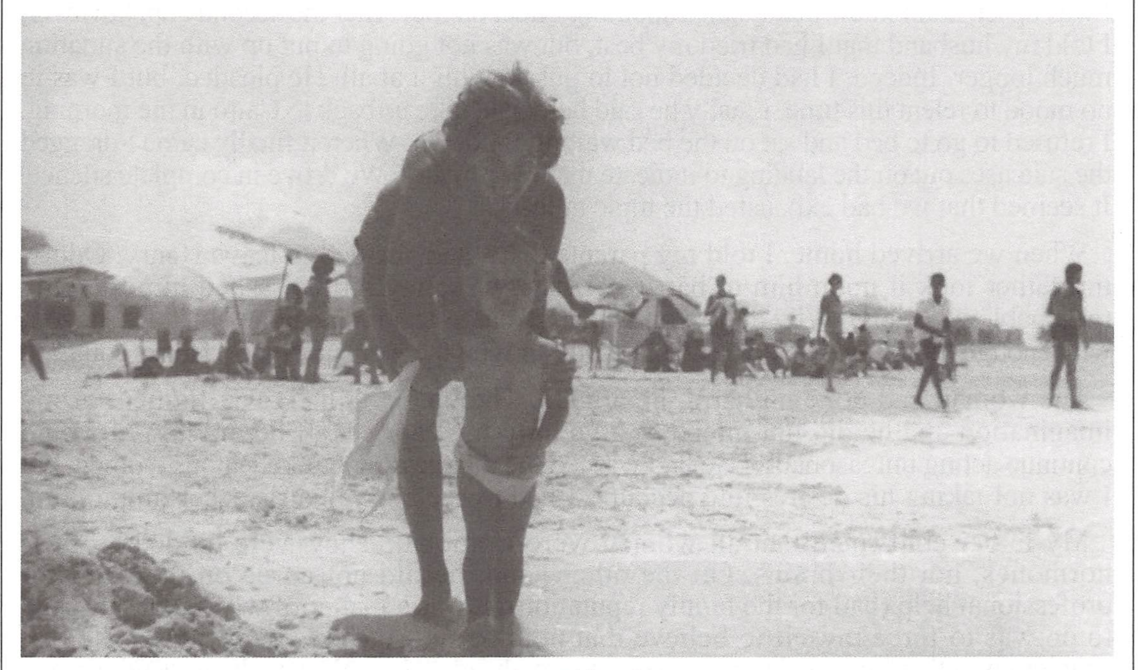
I called Henry and could barely repeat what the doctor had said, so great was my terror. We had to wait two days for the results of the autopsy. They are certainly among the times in my life that I wish to forget. The examination of the cat's remains yielded no enlightening results. It seemed that it had been poisoned, but this diagnosis did not completely exclude rabies. The decision was ours, but if we decided to start the injections we had to do so the following day, no later. I broke down and could do nothing but sob. Henry locked himself in the bedroom. When he came out an hour later, his eyes were red. He must have been crying, or praying, or both. "We are going to wait," he whispered. "It's going to be all right." We waited for three weeks. It is difficult to describe what went through our minds during that time. Henry had insisted that we carry on as usual but I could not take my eyes off my baby, day or night. I observed every one of her reactions. Was she sleeping peacefully? If she was, I would wake her up to make sure she was alive and well. Was she crying? She had never cried in just that way, I would claim and call the doctor. It is very fortunate that during that period she neither caught a cold nor developed a fever because I am sure I would have flipped completely. Finally the third week came to a close and that night Henry and I opened a bottle of champagne. Only then did I realise that Marcelle had not been around. She must have been told that the crisis was over, because the following morning she reappeared like a Jack-in-the-box.

In times of calamity, one often looks back at past causes of irritation and wonders how they could have been taken seriously. Once the danger is no longer threatening, however, we quickly revert to old habits. I had forgotten Marcelle during the crisis, but remembered her with a vengeance and hated her more every day. I wondered how I could get rid of her but could think of no credible scheme. Besides, she was so sweet and loving with me that it was impossible to pick a fight with her. Finally, I decided to talk to her. She listened to me and, when I had finished, smiled: "You are an insecure little girl. Both Henry and I love you very much. I have no intention of snatching your husband. He is just a good friend and I appreciate his company."

It was obvious that she had no intention of making herself scarce. Manuela was almost one and starting to walk. She took up all my time. Although I had a nanny, I no longer

trusted anyone with my daughter. Other mothers at the club thought I was overdoing it, but I kept her on a strict routine, with meals, naps and outings carefully scheduled. One of my friends, who had a slightly older little girl, prided herself on doing what she wanted to, and not putting her child's interests first. It was up to the child to adapt to the grownups' needs, she said; not the other way around. I was positively horrified when she told me that her daughter wanted to go out every day, but that she had no desire to give up her siesta. On the days when she did not want to take her for a stroll, therefore, she dressed her up, took her by the hand, and walked her slowly through the apartment, describing the objects and the furniture as if they were sights the little girl was seeing for the first time. The tour took all of ten minutes, whereupon the child was handed back to her nanny. "Now she loves our home walks and I can nap in the afternoon," the mother concluded with a burst of laughter.

I could never even dream of directing such cruelty toward a child. Mine had needs, all of which had to be fulfilled. And when it was raining, I always begged Henry to drive us around (he did not like playing golf in the rain) then felt abundantly guilty at having kept the baby in the stuffy car and deprived her of her daily ration of fresh air. In fact, my daughter loved those rides so much that when she began teething she could



Agami beach

only sleep when we were driving. I remember a particular night in Agami when we drove all the way to Alexandria and back twice. When, exhausted, we returned home at five in the morning, she woke up and began to holler.

I became addicted to pediatricians and called them at the first threat of a cold. Once, in Agami, Manuela cried throughout the night. I imagined that she was coming down with a life-threatening disease, and at dawn I demanded that Henry find a doctor. In those days Agami was not the fashionable resort it has become since. There were no more than 400 houses in

the area and it was doubtful that a doctor could be found, especially that early in the morning. Henry, however, found a rare specimen, who was spending his extended holidays at the beach. He also happened to be a friend. He had just returned from an all-night party and was fast asleep. Henry dragged him out of bed, helped him get dressed and brought him triumphantly to the house. By the looks of the poor man, strong coffee was in order, but I wanted him to examine my daughter at once. He went to her room while we prepared breakfast in the kitchen. When the table was set and the scalding coffee about to be poured, the doctor had still not reappeared. Alarmed, I went to check on him. I found him fast asleep next to the little girl, who was sucking away on the thermometer and about to doze off herself.

Marcelle disapproved of my constant fretting and said so in no uncertain terms. Henry seemed ambivalent, but certainly not prepared to tell her to mind her own business. And then one evening, when they had gone out without me, I decided I was tired of our open-minded ménage. I retrieved my large suitcase from the broom cupboard and packed. I also packed the baby's things and prepared her bottles for the trip to Cairo. When Henry returned from his dinner, I was ready. "What's going on?" he asked, although what I was doing should have been clear. I told him so, smiling sweetly. "Let's discuss it quietly," he offered. "I'll make some tea." The tea was fine. I had always drunk tea at home when I was upset, and I knew that it had a soothing effect on me. After the second cup, however, I told my husband that I had tried my best, but was not going to put up with the situation much longer. Indeed, I had decided not to put up with it at all. He pleaded, but I was in no mood to relent this time. Finally he said he would take us back to Cairo in the morning. I refused to go to bed and sat on the bed waiting for dawn. When it finally came I dragged the suitcases out on the landing to indicate that I was ready. We drove in complete silence. It seemed that we had exhausted the topic at last.

When we arrived home, I told my parents that I had decided to leave Henry. Oddly, my father took it upon him to bat for Henry, while my mother asked him the only reasonable question. "Why don't you tell Marcelle to leave you alone? If it upsets your wife enough to want to leave you, surely you can send the woman away?" Henry couldn't.

The woman had done no harm, he argued. The whole thing was a figment of my imagination and he did not intend to give in to my caprices. If he did now, I would continue acting unreasonably. He had warned me that he did not like jealous women, but I was not taking his desires into account. I had to see a psychiatric according to him.

My father confirmed that all women were irrational. They were guided by their hormones, not their brains. On the other hand, he did not agree on my need for professional help (bad for the family reputation). It was a matter of willpower: all I had to do was to force myself to believe that nothing unusual was happening. The real problem was that I listened to my nerves not my head. "Haven't you always said women had little brains?" I interjected sourly. "How can I use what I have so little of?" Papa ignored me. In all those years I had not answered back, and now I was proving to him that I was neither a good wife nor a good mother. I went to lie down. Finally Henry came in and promised that he would do his best to discourage Marcelle. That was not good enough. I asked him to leave. My mother then came in to tell him that a woman was asking for him on the telephone. It was Marcelle.

Unsurprisingly, she had followed us to Cairo and wanted to know our plans for dinner. I saw on my parents' faces that they were disturbed by this new development. Henry,

however, was shameless: the poor woman had come all the way to be with us; we had to take her out to dinner, he almost begged. "Go," said my mother. "Don't let him go out alone with her. I'll look after the baby."

We had one of our usual evenings, during which I hardly said a word and Marcelle and Henry kept the conversation going. She asked us to her flat in Garden City for an after-dinner drink. She was meeting an important officer and did not want to be alone with him. On our way to her apartment, she told us that her visa had not been renewed and that she had been asked to leave the country. She was trying to fix things with the officer's help. This was the best news I had heard in months – if the officer proved to be less powerful than she seemed to think. Still, I did not change my mind. I would not go back to Alexandria.

As soon as we arrived in the apartment, Marcelle and Henry went to the kitchen to prepare the drinks. I took this opportunity to slip out the front door and into the street, and hailed a taxi. Surprised to see me returning alone, my mother sat with me for a long time, trying to understand if I was serious about leaving my husband or just throwing a tantrum. Quite truthfully, I did not know myself. I had never seen any offensive or even ambiguous behaviour on the part of my husband and "our friend." On the other hand, I felt left out and uncomfortable in their presence. Before I could explain my feelings clearly, Henry arrived. He was not pleased, but neither was I. It had taken him over an hour to follow me. We did not speak that night and in the morning I told him he should go. While we were arguing, Manuela suddenly let out a piercing scream. She had tried to stand up in her cot and had fallen against the bars, hurting her lip. There was a lot of blood, and by the time we had stopped the flow Henry and I were talking normally again. Finally, he promised that if I went back with him, he would tell Marcelle to get lost. I did not believe him but I went anyway. I had suddenly realised that it was important for Manuela to have a father – for the time being at least.

Marcelle managed to prolong her visa for an extra two months and Henry never gathered the courage (or the will) to tell her anything. He simply decided to stay home and not answer the phone. The nanny was instructed to say that we were out every time she called. After a few weeks of life as recluses, we went to have dinner at the Syrian Club. The first person we saw as we walked in was Marcelle. She marched up to our table and proceeded to abuse Henry in such foul language that all the patrons stopped eating and stared. "Hypocrite" and "coward" were the only printable words that came out of her mouth. I began to giggle. She looked at me with contempt. "You are a stupid little girl who will never learn anything," she told me rather cryptically. She may have been right. I did not care, because I knew we would never see Marcelle again. I thought it would be more generous not to quiz my husband about the accusations the furious woman had levelled against him. Whatever had happened was over.

I should not have fussed so much about Marcelle. She was only the first in a long line of women who accompanied us during our 27 years of marriage. Henry once told me that he had not married me for my looks. He had known much more beautiful women in his life. What he had liked about me was my docile character. Since I did not have a clear image of myself, I depended entirely on him to enlighten me. In contrast, all the women he befriended were older than me, more handsome than pretty, well put together and assertive. They were all very independent, even those who were married.

In the latter case, the husbands were generally non-entities, whom my husband advised and helped along. Most of the time, we lived in a sort of communal set-up, which mercifully did not extend to sleeping arrangements, but seemed to include everything else. We shopped together, spent all our time at each others' house and brought our children up together whether they liked it or not. I never bought clothes for myself or the children except in the company of one of these women, "who knew better". I was encouraged to learn from them and ask questions about their cooking and the way they organised their lives. Henry completely relied on them to give me the support he thought I needed but withheld himself.

Time went by. I began to realise that there was no sexual component in these rather intense relationships with other women, but a sort of complicity between equals that he never achieved with me. They understood him, while I wanted to be understood; they cared for him, while I wanted to be cared for. I had remained a child-bride to be humoured or chastised, whereas they possessed all the adult qualities I was sorely missing. Henry's male ego had been flattered by marrying a "virgin" but what he needed really was a mother. His had been caring, forgiving and forever supportive, even when he lost most of his inheritance on the tables of the Montaza casino and at the races. She had intrigued to find him jobs and helped in all the ways she could. He had respected her judgment and believed in her wisdom, acquired, he was convinced, through her special experience. She convinced him that he could do no wrong and now he missed this benign, authoritative albeit adoring figure.

Soon after the closure of the Marcelle incident, Henry slowly rewrote the scenario. He had only tried to help a wonderful, gifted woman in trouble, who suffered from a rejection syndrome caused by her failed marriages. To avoid yet more bitterness, I buried the conviction that she had willfully almost wrecked mine. I forced myself to admit that there were many sides to a story and that from my husband's point of view I had been selfish and mean, and generally behaved like a spoiled child. By the time the next woman in our lives loomed on the horizon, I had been properly indoctrinated into welcoming her.

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At that particular moment, Henry's landscape was changing: things looked glum Just before we had married, his closest associate, a Jew, had ceded his share in the company to his Egyptian step-father and slipped out of the country unnoticed. He had also relieved the company of its cash, telling Henry untruthfully that he was turning his insurance portfolio over to the older man.

The stepfather had discreetly assumed some responsibilities in the office, albeit always deferring to my husband. He was so modest in his demeanour that Henry took pity on him and began to invite him to his poker games. Abdel-Salam Bey was the perfect "pigeon". He dropped hundreds of pounds on the table almost nightly and took his partners' scoffing with good humour. Now, it was suddenly being rumoured that the insurance agency would be nationalised under the decree applying to foreign companies. It would be handed over to a government insurance company, its owners encouraged to stay on as salaried directors but not forbidden to resign if they so wished. Henry, who had become wary of Egyptian banks (which, he expected, would begin turning depositors away any day), kept all his money in the office safe. I sometimes asked him about the

wisdom of this choice and at others about Abdel-Salam Bey's total indifference to his poker losses. How could he have so much money to gamble with? I never saw him do anything more than read the newspaper at the office. Was he paid a salary? What exactly was his role? Henry did not like me to meddle in his affairs and asked me not to worry. He knew what he was doing. His second partner, also Jewish, was about to leave, and my husband would clarify the situation then. He would probably get rid of Abdel-Salam Bey and work out an arrangement with the insurance company. Meanwhile, the guy was keeping the snooping Mukhabarat away from us. Abel-Salam had many good friends there, Henry repeated rather condescendingly. I was such a child, he seemed to say, unable to judge people's characters; here was a perfectly good man, devoted to my husband and I was unable to simply trust him!

Egypt was going through turbulent times, but I paid no attention. I was dreaming of a second child. Most of our friends had fled, but I considered that this did not concern us. Henry had said that he would always remain in Egypt, that it was a blessed country and that nowhere in the world could we have such an easy life. It went without saying that I completely agreed with him. We had a comfortable apartment, a maid, a summerhouse and long holidays during which to enjoy the sand and the sea. Besides, life was cheaper than anywhere else. Whatever would make us leave such a paradise?

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I was momentarily jolted out of my sheltered world by Raymonde's arrival. She was Henry's older half-sister who lived in the United States and whom I had never met. She mentioned for the first time that their sister Rosa and her family were emigrating to Canada. Didn't we know? Henry seemed to have been aware of the preparations, but I had been kept in the dark. Rosa's older son had had to leave in a hurry before he was drafted, and they had chosen to make their home in Montreal, where they would feel more at home because of the language. As we lingered over coffee at the Santa Lucia, it became clear that all Henry's relatives were leaving. "How about you? Where will you go?" asked Raymonde.

When she was told that we were staying on, she expressed the opinion that we were out of our minds, and were failing to realise how much danger we were in. She read the papers in a country where the press was free and could not begin to tell us what would happen if we did not make our getaway soon.

Henry shrugged off his half-sister's advice, but despite his optimism, he was beginning to see the writing on the wall. We read no newspapers, had no television and were generally uninterested in the changes taking place in Egypt. We wanted it to remain the same and ignored news of failed arm deals, negotiations over the High Dam or trouble on the Egyptian-Israeli borders. It had not been healthy to discuss politics in public, and we had carried the warning to its logical conclusion. We had stopped even thinking about it.

One evening we were invited to a black-tie affair thrown by a Lebanese family that had been extremely close to Henry. It was a lavish party in one of the most imposing villas in Bulkley. We talked with our hosts, danced with them and drank to the loveliest party of the season. Then, around midnight, the buffet was opened and we concentrated on the magnificent spread, which had come straight from Beirut. When the first people to leave the party began to drift towards the limousines parked outside, we discovered

that our hosts had disappeared. Henry, who was familiar with the house, went upstairs to check the bedrooms. He found the wardrobes open and empty. It dawned on him that his friends had taken advantage of their guests' gluttony and fled to the airport. He returned to tell the remaining carousers to carry on, and that the hosts would come down shortly to bid them good night.

This first shock was followed by another, around a month later. We were celebrating my birthday at home when the doorbell rang. It was after midnight and we looked at each other, puzzled. Were we expecting a late visitor? Maybe my brother had driven over from Cairo to wish me a happy birthday? When Henry opened the door, he was confronted with two policemen and a man in civilian clothes. They asked the *khawaga* to follow them to the Mukhabarat. My husband argued that it was my birthday and that he was willing to go there first thing in the morning, but they remained unyielding. He had to come now. The guests looked at each other uneasily. They seemed to know something that I did not. One of the women went to the kitchen to refresh the coffee pot, as if we were preparing for a long vigil. Someone even suggested that I pack a bag for Manuela and me and spend the rest of the night at their place. Finally, at dawn, the telephone rang. A strange voice told me that my husband wanted to speak with me. Henry came on the line, speaking Arabic. He told me not to worry, that he was being treated very well, but did I happen to remember the name of an American who used to visit us in Agami the previous summer? Agami was a madhouse, with people coming and going at all hours. I did not know half of my guests and remembered even fewer. I drew a blank at first. "Try to remember, please, it is important," my husband, said. I felt tension in his voice. "The man used to bring us imported beer, and his wife ate all our Fluckiger cakes…" It was coming back. "Bill, I said. "She was Marilyn. They were both very red."

"Any second names?" my husband insisted. "Do you remember if they said what they were doing in Egypt? To both question I could immediately answer no. I was sure that I had never known. A few minutes later, Henry was back. Amidst much congratulatory back thumping, he accepted a cup of coffee, although he said he had downed half a dozen cups during the interrogation. "Incidentally, you saved me. They were listening in on the other line and you sounded so truthful that they were convinced we had only a very superficial relationship with Bill or whatever his real name is. They suspect he was an agent and thought he had been recruiting me." Although we laughed at the time, we found out that our Bedouin landowner had been informing on us, noting the number plates on our visitors' cars and quizzing our maid. Henry was furious. There followed protracted negotiations between Henry and the Bedouin, who had put it in his mind to cancel our lease on the grounds that we were spies and to keep our furniture, including an electricity generator that my father had lent us. There were frequent visits to various police stations and all sorts of threats. It was no longer safe to spend the summer in Agami.

Meanwhile, the insurance agency was finally nationalised and the meek and mild Abdel-Salam Bey showed his true colours. The safe in the office was sealed, with Henry's cash in it, and declared company assets. My husband, who never kept accounts and who had been simply throwing in any money he did not need immediately, then helping himself when he ran short of notes and coins, had no proof that the contents of the safe belonged to him personally. A row with his erstwhile pigeon yielded only advice to complain at the head office in Cairo. There, he was confronted with the chairman of the company whose only title to the job was his marriage to the sister of

a Free Officer. The chairman had no intention of discussing things rationally. He simply wanted to let it be known that he was all-powerful, and could harm those who harboured misgivings about his decisions. Suddenly we were in murky waters, dealing with people very close to the government who did not seem to harbour tender feelings towards us.

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My grandmother died in the summer of 1965. When my family arrived from Cairo I had immediately noticed the change in her. She had lost weight, but it was more than that; she looked emptied of her substance. She did nothing differently, though and was still an avid reader of politics. She worried about Ben Bella, who had disappeared, and waited impatiently for the papers to be delivered morning and afternoon. She considered Ben Bella a special friend of hers because she had met him in Lausanne during one of our holidays. He was staying at the same hotel and they had talked. Whether they had exchanged a few polite words or had a real conversation I am not sure, but from that day on he took pride of place in the gallery of special people, which included the former queens of Greece and Spain, the former king of Italy and young Princess Ann.

Doctors came and went, but found nothing to say. I tried to stay with her as long as I could in the afternoons because I had a sick feeling, which told me that she would not be around the following summer. She died in her sleep on 2 July, a few days short of her birthday, which was on Bastille Day. When the telephone rang in our apartment in the middle of the night, I knew at once what I was about to hear. “She just died,” said a sobbing woman’s voice. I could not make out at once if it was my mother or my sister. “Please, come at once.” I began to dress, but my husband stopped me: “You forgot to take a shower,” he said and pushed me gently towards the bathroom while he went to the kitchen to make coffee. My stomach churned at the sickening sweet smell of the soap but the warm water on my body calmed me down and as I towelled myself I noticed that I had stopped trembling. In later years, whenever I heard bad news, I immediately jumped into the shower before facing emergencies. My brother came for me and it was agreed that Henry would follow with Manuela and her nanny in the morning. We drove in silence. I began shaking again. “Is she very … different?” I asked him. “No,” he said. “Just sleeping … stiffly.”

My mother had not been crying. She was far beyond tears. Her eyes looked like two black holes in their sockets and the skin of her face was drawn over the bones. I noticed then that she had lost an awful lot of weight. We filed into the room and I kissed Nenna while my mother kneeled at her side. We did not know quite what to do. My grandmother was a Catholic, but she had refused to see a priest during her illness. My mother, however, was sure that she had been saying her prayers during her last few hours. In this mainly secular household, no one was sure how to organise a Christian funeral for a woman who had no friends, no acquaintances and no relatives, in a country that she had never considered hers but where she had spent over half a century. She had lived as a voluntary recluse for thirty of these years, save for the pre-1956 summer holidays, when we travelled to Europe. We had no idea where she should be buried or how one went about doing it. I called Henry and he told me that he would take care of the formalities.

A little later, nuns from a nearby convent arrived to wash my grandmother’s body. They slapped it around for a bit because it was already cold, while we watched in horror. They kept repeating *che bella*, while tying her chin with a ribbon and massaging her limbs. They

then tried to squeeze my grandmother into her best black dress, but rigor mortis had already set in. My mother began to scream when they twisted one of the dead woman's arms in a hopeless attempt to get it through the sleeve. Finally we decided that she could wear one of the dressing gowns in which we had seen her for so many years, seated at the kitchen table chopping and paring to prepare one of her delicious meals.

Henry was put in charge of the paperwork, on the assumption that, having buried his mother a couple of years before, he knew the procedures Christians had to follow. The fact that my grandmother was a Roman Catholic, while my husband's family followed the Greek Catholic rites, did not seem to matter greatly; Nenna was promptly laid to rest in Alexandria's Roman Catholic cemetery, and the proper masses were said to facilitate her passage to the afterlife.

When we returned home from the cemetery, I was shocked to hear my daughter, not yet three, tell her doll: "Nenna was taken away in a box and is never coming back." She had barely had time to get to know my grandmother, and I had expressly told the nanny to stay with her in the garden at the back of the house. As we sat in the living room, searching for the words to comfort my mother and falling silent after each awkward attempt, we suddenly heard loud music from the villa next door. It was obvious that the owners were hosting a wedding, which was about to take place in the garden. We looked at each other in horror. Then my mother, pale as death itself from grief and now rage, said she could not tolerate such a lack of respect. Surely they had seen the hearse stationed in front of our door? The gardener was dispatched to ask them to move the festivities indoors as a sign of respect. He was told that not only would the wedding take place as planned, but care would be taken to make it as loud as possible. If the *hanem* (my mother) was not happy, the bride's father would call his contacts in high places and in no time our front door would be decorated with red wax (sequestrated properties were sealed before being distributed among the regime's new favourites). Henry was asked to go and present an olive branch with our best wishes to the newlyweds. The music blasted through our house until dawn, but we now knew we belonged to the minority who had to grin and bear it.

My mother was never the same after my grandmother's death. She seemed desperate in a hard and final sort of way. I wanted both to be with her and to stay away, because I had suddenly glimpsed how bitter the years had made her.

I also had more time to think, and began to worry about the future. As summer turned into autumn and my mother finally closed the Rushdi villa for the winter, Alexandria suddenly seemed deserted. I had loved the city, but now it was no longer friendly. Nasser's rhetoric was growing more impassioned by the day, and a few unpleasant incidents proved to me that the few foreigners still around were no longer entirely safe on the streets. Suddenly we were being constantly mistaken for tourists and treated as such, which was rather aggressively. Henry was often in Cairo hammering out the details of financial compensation from his company, and I suggested that we move in with my family for a while, especially since my sister, who had gone to Italy on a three-week holiday, showed no intention of returning any time soon. She had made an unscheduled visit to London and our youngest stepsister had offered her a place to stay. Compared to life in Cairo and the less than buoyant mood of its citizens, London offered a miraculously vivid atmosphere.

Then Henry began to talk about emigration. He did so very carefully at first, knowing that I would resist the project fiercely, and half-joked about how interesting moving to Europe would be. Among the few foreigners left, this was the only topic of conversation. Godfrey, one of Henry's best friends, and a Lloyd underwriter, was moving to Athens. He offered my husband a job there, on the condition than he took the Chartered Insurance Institute Examinations. Henry bought the books but soon gave up. He was unable to concentrate and this was a four-year affair, the equivalent of a master's in insurance. Henry had never finished high school and was certainly not going to acquire good studying habits at this time in his life.

From one of his trips to Cairo, he brought back preliminary applications picked up at the Canadian embassy. Both Henry's age and his lack of formal education disqualified him, however, and our demand was promptly rejected. Greece would not be so bad, I argued, if only he gave the institute a chance. It would take him four years at least to graduate from it, I reflected privately; and no one knew what could happen in four years. "If you think it's so easy, why don't you take the exams yourself?" retorted my irate husband. Godfrey though that was not such a stupid idea. My university degree would give me a year's credit, and Henry could open an agency in Athens in my name, complying with Lloyd's conditions. I sent in my application and was soon enrolled in the institute's programme, which involved correspondence courses as well as classes offered by specialists in Cairo. Moving to the capital now seemed quite reasonable. My mother agreed; my father let it be known that he did not care one way or the other. It was not exactly the warmest of welcomes, but we decided that it would be temporary and, if we made up our minds to stay in Cairo permanently, we would find our own place. The threat of having to leave Egypt forever was thus remanded to an indefinite future, which was all I could hope for under the circumstances. I stopped thinking about it and began to organise our move to Cairo.

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Emile's daughter had just married an American geologist and they were looking for a furnished apartment. It made sense to lease them ours for a year. We agreed on a modest rent and made the move. There was no way I could keep a nanny at my parents', so I began to care for my daughter myself. In the evening, after she had gone to sleep, I would sit in my father's small study off the hall and open my books. Unfortunately, being a full-time mother was exhausting and I often fell asleep on my chair and dreamed that I was still reading. My complete lack of interest in the topic compounded the difficulty. Bills of lading and replacement values did not excite me in the least. I continue to plod on however until my brother introduced me to Ritalin, then for a pound a pill by all cigarette vendors. I sailed through my first exams with flying colours. The drawback was that, once I stopped taking the drug, I fell into such a severe depression that getting out of bed in the morning became an impossible endeavour.

During that time, I had paid little attention to the events around me. Now that I was momentarily free of premium calculations, I began to notice that Henry and my mother were not really hitting it off. She was upset that he spent his time – and money – playing golf and poker while I cared for our daughter and studied, and he resented the dirty looks she never failed to bestow on him when he came home. He decided to go apartment hunting, a project I warmly encouraged because it meant that he had given up on the emigration project.

We visited dozens of apartments, and it amuses me today that Henry ruled out Mohandessin because he refused to live "in a rural area." It would have made sense to live in Heliopolis, where his mother's apartment was vacant and perfectly comfortable, but he refused to go "back to the desert" and gave the apartment to one of his cousins instead. During our years in Cairo, Henry often seemed to behave like a child who, having decided that he had outgrown his toys, proceeds to break every one of them. He had a row with the powerful chaiman of the insurance company that had taken over his agency, alienating him completely and making it impossible for him to work out



Father and daughter at the Gezira Club just before leaving Egypt

a deal. He turned down a splendid apartment on the Nile in Zamalek because he refused, on principle, to pay two pounds a month extra for the garage. Finally we settled for a small apartment under construction not far away from my parents' villa. It would take six months to be ready, but he was willing to wait – a rather bewildering attitude given that he had befriended the Australian vice-consul and was preparing to apply for emigration to Australia. I never knew from one day to the next what he had in store for us. We were leaving but staying, making long-term projects only to scrap them and turn our sights in the opposite direction.

Meanwhile, we were running short of money. The rent of our Alexandria flat went towards covering Henry's losing streak at golf and poker, and I was often asked to depend on my mother for our bare necessities. Maman's remarks grew more hurtful by the day, and I finally decided to find a job. I was offered an unexpectedly high salary to work for a transport company that specialised in packing and transporting the belongings of departing staff from all foreign embassies. On the surface, it was an easy job, and I enjoyed it at first. I supervised the packers to make sure they were hiding no forbidden items in the crates. My mother was taking care of Manuela and I considered

I was having an easy time and making good money. Then my mother decided that Manuela was a too much of a handful. She had just turned three and we enrolled her at the Franciscans, who ran a famous kindergarten for diplomats' children. Henry had negotiated her admission with the mother superior, invoking his cousin the patriarch, and she had accepted, warning us that if the authorities came to inspect the school, we would have to withdraw our daughter at once. She was very happy there, and immediately became the most popular child in the school, displaying a gregarious tendency that she not only maintained, but fine-tuned as she grew up.

All seemed well until I was summoned by the Mukhabarat and asked many questions about my work in the embassies. Since I had no idea what they were talking about, I was really no help to them, but they hinted that I knew my German boss was tampering with the crates after they had been sealed in front of me. By using me as a front, he was able to smuggle out precious carpets, silverware, jewelry and even money. I was advised to stop working for him at once. When I went to the office to hand in my resignation, my boss refused to give me my month's salary. Henry went to see him then, intending to work out some sort of settlement. He was met with abuse, and the man extracted a gun from his drawer, then proceeded to wave it around recklessly, just in case my husband had failed to understand that he had no intention of paying up. As the employees looked on with a measure of indifference, indicating that this was not the first time such demands had been rejected with such finality, my husband beat a prudent path to the door.

When he went to the police, he found there was another side to the story. The German thug was in fact working for the government, packing illicit items then informing on his clients. Only when he tried to get a cut, reserving a few choice pieces for himself, was he given a warning in the form of my interrogation, which his paymasters expected I would report to him. I had foiled the plot by running scared and deciding to quit. My former boss was now under the impression that I had been helping myself too and no longer needed the job. In any case, he was not to be touched and we were advised to kiss my last paycheck goodbye and try to keep our mouths shut.

My foray into the new regime world of paid employment had come to an abrupt end. The noose seemed to be tightening, and we decided to sell our car to see us through a rather rough spot. We were offered an excellent price for our ten-year-old Fiat almost immediately, and used some of the money to buy a second-hand Ramses, a car made in Egypt, which was quite sturdy and valiantly took us wherever we wanted to go.

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The years 1966 and 1967 were heart wrenching. I lived on a constant emotional roller coaster. Henry did not seem willing, or able, to make up his mind. I couldn't tell if he was trying to put down roots or cut himself loose. He began to furnish our small apartment – lavishly for the kind of money we had. For the first time in his life, Emile had a proper job, as director of a reputed furniture factory. Henry ordered many items from there, including an elaborate room divider, designed for us by a Russian architect and costing as much as the Ramses car. We acquired a poodle for my daughter, who was no longer going to kindergarten, the mother superior having decreed that it was too dangerous to hide an Egyptian among her foreign pupils, not even when the native had blond hair, green eyes and a Spanish name.

The poodle, aptly named Coffee, was light brown and extremely vicious. He was jealous of his young mistress, whom he believed was competing directly, and unfairly, for our attention, and delighted in biting her bottom when we were not looking. She would scream and he would hide, whenever caught him red-handed, so to speak, but the marks on her posterior were irrefutable proof. Henry enjoyed taking Coffee for walks, but there again his pleasure was not complete. The dog was quite enthusiastic about sniffing car wheels and tree trunks, but somehow refused to do what was expected of him. No matter how long the walk, he waited to be back in the apartment before relieving himself on the carpets.

These had been purchased by Rosa, who intended to smuggle them out of Egypt when she left permanently for Canada. They were Persian, and of the expensive variety, although not very beautiful according to me. At the last minute, she had developed cold feet and decided to place the carpets with us, with instructions to forward them as soon as it was possible. Among Henry's futile endeavours at the time was the impossible task of finding someone willing to include them in his shipment. Having Coffee use them repeatedly as his bathroom was not exactly doing them good. I had to drench the spots with soda water several times a day, but while this treatment took care of potential discolouration when applied at once, it did not erase the smell, with the result that the dog was quick to detect it and repeat his performance.

When he was not walking the dog, Henry was visiting the Australian embassy and had asked me to fill out several application forms, "just in case". We went for the medical examination, which provided me with moments of mirth, since to hide my strong myopia I had to memorise the chart while waiting for the examiner; as for Henry, he had to kick the doctor repeatedly to prevent him from discovering that he had a hernia.

As he bought furniture for the apartment, Henry began to frequent antique dealers who came to the house and often purchased a piece that had arrived only a few days earlier. Our décor changed constantly, creating the impression that we lived in a furniture depot. I had also gathered that part of the money he was making that way was being channelled to Australia, where he had acquired a sponsor and a bank account, also "just in case." Whenever I quizzed him, he would tell me he was bored and simply keeping busy until something turned up.

Golf also provided my husband with much-needed distraction, until the day Mohamed Bey appeared on the links. He was a new member, although my father, sitting with us one afternoon at the clubhouse, had remarked that he knew him well. Mohamed (not yet Bey at the time) had been a young lawyer in Wasta, Upper Egypt, and my father,

who had been in the town for a trial a few years back, had seen him arriving at the courthouse on a donkey. By this time, the most underprivileged juniors were driving at least second-hand cars. My father marvelled at his rise from the donkey to a membership at the Gezira Club and a golf personal trainer in a less than ten years. He must be with the Mukhabarat too, Papa said with a tired smile. "Everyone is these days!"

Perhaps Henry unconsciously registered my father's words, because he developed a strong aversion to the man. He did his best to exclude him from any foursome that was forming on ordinary afternoons and withdrew from competitions when he had to play against him. Then the rumour began to circulate that Mohamed Bey was given to cheating. The British had left the country their legacy of the stringent principles that ruled the game, and these had remained intact. Cheating meant exclusion. Unaware of what he was letting himself into, Henry began to circulate a petition to have Mohamed Bey chastised by the Golf Federation. Since he had time on his hands, he took the thing quite seriously, visiting golfers in the morning at their offices, where they felt freer to sign. I was pleased that this new activity kept his mind off plotting with the Australian vice-consul to get us a landing permit. One day, however, he lost his list. He was rather upset at the idea of having to start all over again, but decided it could not be helped. Henry always misplaced documents, keys and money, and it was not unusual to see the lost items turn up in the most peculiar places, so I did not even attempt to look for it.

A week later, he was picked up by the Mukhabarat. After the usual preliminaries, they showed him his petition. He was put through a gruelling interrogation and only let go when they had satisfied themselves that Henry's interest in Mohamed Bey did not go beyond his dishonorable behaviour on the golf course. The intelligence agents also made it clear to him that he would be much better off concentrating his energies on more personal endeavours.

This may well have been the last straw. Heeding the agents' advice, Henry began to prepare earnestly for our future in Australia. We received our landing permit, valid for two years. To Henry's surprise, however, we could not just up and go. We needed permission from the Egyptian government, and for this we needed official documents. As he began to wade through his personal papers with the help of a discreet lawyer recommended by Emile, he discovered that he had never acquired the Egyptian nationality. Technically, he was therefore not Egyptian; but he was nothing else either. His parents had been Ottoman subjects, and his father had died while Henry was still a minor. He should have applied for naturalisation when he turned 21, but no one had told him to do so. He had not travelled, either, since his childhood in Lebanon, and could not remember if he had ever owned a passport.

Compared to what was to come, this was an easy problem to solve. Some school certificates were wormed out of reluctant priests by dangling before their eyes Henry's relationship to the Greek Catholic Patriarch ("a great friend of the Pope, as you know, Father"); others simply had to be forged by one of the numerous specialists who were doing a brisk trade in false documents. ("They are only school certificates, you don't have to worry; it is not as if I were doing something criminal" was his line when I objected) Within a few months, Henry became a full-fledged Egyptian. The next hurdle was the marriage certificate, which in its actual state could not be counted upon to pass

the scrutiny of the interested authorities. There were no more members of Henry's family in Egypt. He decided to proceed with his conversion to Islam now that none of his relatives was likely to find out. This is how, five years after we had been "married", we finally went to visit the *ma'zoun* in Giza – the same one my parents thought had married us. We were accompanied by our little daughter a fact that I am sure influenced the ma'zoun when the time for payment came.

No matter; now we were operating within the law, and Henry sallied forth with renewed energies. I waited anxiously at home for the results of his daily visits at the Mugamma' a complex of offices built in the neo Russian style where the official papers of the whole nation were slowly processed. Two years was the average time needed to obtain the simplest documents. I was hoping quite realistically that somewhere, something would go wrong, Henry would lose patience and we would not have to leave, especially now that as far as I was concerned my married status was in order. My sister was still in England and my brother, recently graduated from AUC, was teaching there, using his new job as a pretext not to come home until late at night. My mother and father were extremely lonely and, while he was happy with his wife's company, she was generally depressed but growing attached to Manuela nevertheless. We could have such a nice life, I often thought. We needed so little: jobs for Henry and me that totalled a hundred pounds a month, and a decent school for our daughter. Was it asking too much?

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Going away

During the last week of May 1967, my brother suddenly became ill. The worst was suspected and he was advised to leave for Europe immediately. That was easier said than done, and while his medical file was prepared for presentation to the government medical commission, my mother began to pull whatever strings she could. My father, who had all his life refused to let a surgeon tamper with a member of his family, did nothing to help her. One of my aunts, it was said, had died from a burst appendix because the men in the family had not heeded the local doctor's advice. My father was adamantly against any kind of surgical operation, and often told us that we were meant to meet our Creator intact. So my poor mother, beside herself with anxiety, had to go it alone. She no longer had friends who could help her, and those in power did not seem inclined to look sympathetically upon the problem of an old regime family who believed Egyptian practitioners not good enough for their son.

I was back in Alexandria by then, where Henry had been negotiating the sale of the furniture of our apartment. Since the exchange of key money, the ruling principle of rentals in Egypt from time immemorial, carried now a prison sentence, fixtures and fittings were thrown in at a largely inflated price, to make up for the price (shared by tenant and landlord) of passing on the lease. Upon hearing the news from Cairo, we decided to leave immediately.

Our valiant little car could not be counted on to cross the desert safely being badly in need o a new battery, so we travelled by train, which was fast and comfortable. It was the 5th of June and, unbelievable as it may be, we had not read the papers or listened to the radio that morning. We knew nothing of the momentous events that had been taking place while we packed our bags. The station was bustling at that early hour, but we still thought nothing of it. Only when we boarded an unusually crowded compartment did it dawn on us: something extraordinary was taking place.

Henry began to talk to the other passengers, careful not to disclose his vast ignorance of the situation. He soon came back with the news: we were at war with Israel. Several transistor radios were transmitting the news, and people kept cheering, singing patriotic songs then shouting slogans they had made up, it seemed, on the spur of the moment. It took us over seven hours to make it to Cairo, the train crawling to a stop every few kilometers. Strangely, I never felt we were in any sort of danger. Maybe I was reassured by the yells of the passengers as they counted the number of Israeli planes the Egyptians had shot down. I felt a surge of patriotism, and wanted to join in the general euphoria. When I heard Henry whisper "baloney" under his breath I became terribly resentful. I was convinced that we were winning the war, and that the times of gloom would soon be over. If Egypt won a crushing victory, we would no longer need to be under constant surveillance and things would ease up. It was a good thing that we still had our apartment in Alexandria.

My mother was waiting for us at the station and her driver took the luggage, hurrying us along so that we could be home before the curfew. "What curfew?" I asked puzzled. "I thought the war was taking place in Israel."

We arrived at home just before lights out, and finished unpacking in the dark. Manuela was scared but we explained to her that it was a power failure, whereupon she asked us to light candles. She was upset because we had left Coffee in Emile's care, and she missed her dog now that he was not there to bite her.

In the following days we began to line our windows with blue paper and quickly got used to staying home, only visiting my family nearby. Henry had a constant smirk on his face and predicted that the war would be over soon – crowned by our resounding defeat. I refused to believe him, although my father agreed with him. They kept whispering about our air force having been wiped out before it had even had a chance to take off. For once, my father and my husband seemed to agree on our rulers' ineptitude.

One night, the police came to our flat. We had been seen making signals from our windows, they said. We tried to show them that it was a figment of their imagination that we did not even own a torch, but they insisted that blinking lights had repeatedly been sighted coming from the stairwell. They had checked all the apartments: they were owned by Egyptians. They stressed this point to make us understand our protests did not fool them. We looked like foreigners, we spoke like foreigners; therefore we were foreigners, and up to no good if you asked them. Why were we still here, when our likes had left the country? one officer asked subtly.

Finally they discovered that the pilot lamp of our water heater was waving in the wind. We were sternly told to put it out if we did not want to spend the night at the police station, where chances were that we would be charged as spies.

Within a week, it became abundantly clear that my father's and husband's forecast had been correct. We owned neither a radio nor a telephone, and needless to say we had no television, so we only gathered information when we went shopping for necessities at the nearby grocer's, or when my mother came to visit at the end of the day. She was frantic that passing time would prove fatal for my brother, but short of chartering a small sailboat to Athens with him, as many of our friends had done to escape the country unnoticed, she had no choice but to wait. To while away the hours, we often discussed the possibilities of organising such a nautical trip, but it had its drawbacks, even if one did not consider the immediate and very real danger of drowning on the way across the Mediterranean. One of our friends who needed to escape before being drafted in the army had travelled down the Nile to the Sudan in this manner. In Khartoum, he had boarded a plane to London, only to hear the captain announce that they were having engine trouble and would be landing in Cairo. Our friend had to hide in the plane until it took off ten hours later. My mother was not particularly amused. A woman of action all her life, she could not accept that there was absolutely nothing she could do.

At last, the Egyptian people had to face the evidence. We had been beaten, no matter how we looked at it. On the afternoon of the day our defeat was officially acknowledged, we heard an ominous rumbling from afar. After a while we could make out shouting. We ran to the windows. Trucks full of people were rumbling past, the occupants begging Abdel-Nasser at the tops of their voices to remain at the helm. "He tricked them," said my husband with a hearty laugh. We ran downstairs and were told that the *Rayyis* had offered to step down, but that the people were pleading with him to stay. To his dying day, my husband did not believe that this was a spontaneous demonstration. It never entered his head that people could genuinely love Abdel-Nasser.

A benevolent celestial power must have created loopholes in the system: through them, my mother and brother managed to escape to London, where they met my runaway sister. She had arranged my mother's accommodation and booked my brother in the

hospital. My mother describes this period as the most terrible in her life, especially after the diagnosis of the doctors in Cairo was confirmed. She did not know if she should stay in London with my brother permanently (whatever permanently meant in that case) or return to Egypt. I tried to take care of my father the best I could, which wasn't much really, except for cooking him a few meals, when he was too tired to visit his daughters. I sometimes took him to the club, where he insisted on detailing to me the reasons of the Egyptian debacle at the top of his voice. I kept looking around me in fear, fully expecting to see officers materialise behind him. Nothing ever happened; members kept on greeting him with respect and nodding at his words when they felt that they were not being observed.

I remember those days as a very low point in my life. Nothing good was happening. The club was deserted in the mornings and, although I insisted on taking Manuela there, I had been scared off once when the young members of the civil defence, who had taken over the grounds, surrounded and began to threaten us, accusing us of being Jewish spies. Only the waiters at the restaurant saved us, vouching that they had known my family for at least 30 years and that we were one hundred per cent Egyptian. After this episode I stayed home until the late afternoon, when Papa or Henry could come with me.

Only one incident had broken the gloom: During the week of the war, my husband had gone to visit the Australian vice-consul at home. As he reached the apartment, the sirens sounded the alarm, announcing another air raid. The servant opened the door but the vice-consul was nowhere to be found, although his wife was quite sure that he had not left the house. Finally he was discovered crouching under the bed, shaking and swearing that if he came out alive he would never accept another post in a backward country. He was helped off the floor and given a stiff drink. If there were any Australian citizens left in the country, they were not likely to be helped by their vice-consul, Henry concluded.

More heartbreak was to come, when Henry decided that it was time to give Coffee a new home. Australian rules were very clear: we could not take an animal with us. More than ever, Henry was determined to move. I argued for days that we had not received our final papers, and maybe we would not leave after all, but he was adamant. I cried uncontrollably while handing over the little pest, which had been a source of more bother than pleasure. He was one of the family regardless, and I felt that we would no longer be whole. Henry tried to reason with me: I knew the person who was taking Coffee, and had no reason to believe he would be unhappy. I disliked my husband intensely for putting us through this ordeal. Although Manuela did not seem to mind, I felt the pain she should have experienced was added to mine. I cried for her and for myself. The accumulated heartache of the past several months seemed to be pouring out and there was nothing I could do to stop the flow.

When the tears dried at last, I felt such immense sadness that I decided to pretend I was just reading a novel. None of this was happening to me. Soon I would put the book away and return to my real life in Alexandria and the bickering with Emile. I managed to abstract myself from the events around me. It is strange that all my unhappiness crystallised around the loss of our dog, whereas other, more shattering blows did not shake me as much. After we relinquished Coffee, Henry went to Alexandria, where an

army officer had been trying to gain entry and settle forcibly in our empty apartment. He was told that the only thing he could do to stop the trespasser was to live in the apartment until he had concluded its sale. I, on the other hand, had to remain in Cairo because of my father. I called my husband every day from my parents' house and realised that he was adjusting quite well to his renewed bachelor status. My father's ironic smile informed me that I should not worry about Henry's well being. He knew how to take care of himself, the smile implied.

I am not sure that I missed him as much as I missed Coffee, but I decided to pay him an impromptu visit just the same. I was suffering from severe insomnia mainly brought about by the distressing feeling that I no longer knew anyone in Cairo who could lend us a hand in case of trouble. I still believed firmly that we helpless women needed a man to take care of us. With my brother and my husband gone and my father beset by old age, I felt awfully vulnerable. Life had not yet returned to normal after the war: I recall travelling with Manuela to Alexandria on a bus where we were the only civilians among soldiers returning from the front. There were very kind to us, repeatedly offering me cigarettes and playing games with my daughter, or wooing her with sweets and chocolates. At the rest house, they insisted on buying us drinks and before we arrived, I had had several offers of marriage in case I decided to leave my husband. I was not particularly interested, although the thought of no longer having to go to Australia was rather tempting; but I was happy at the turn of the conversation. Innocent banter was preferable to questions about who I was and what I was doing travelling with a child to Alexandria. Even innocent answers were likely to land me in trouble, I had come to learn.

I found Henry playing golf at the Sporting Club. He had a poker game planned for the evening and could therefore not come back home with me, but he promised to talk Emile into staying in our apartment for a while. The problem was that Emile had grown attached to his married next-door neighbour and was reluctant to move… He would try to think of something. It was plain that Henry was enjoying his temporarily unattached status.

We had lunch at the Santa Lucia and I was reminded of how sweet and simple life had been, and how little I had appreciated it then. I began sobbing into my chicken livers. Couldn't we turn back the clock, forget about leaving, just try to hang on for a while longer? I begged Henry. He looked around surreptitiously to make sure that no one was observing us, especially since Manuela was now bawling in unison without knowing what it was all about. Things would change for the better, I could feel it, I carried on, regardless of Henry's embarrassment; all we needed was a little patience. Where would he find such a lovely city with good golf courses and poker games every night? As I went through the list of our blessings, I already knew that it was no use. Henry had decided to head for Australia and he was going to do it no matter how many people he hurt in the process. In the evening, he put us on the train to Cairo, promising to join us by the end of the week. During that period, he managed to finally get his price for the apartment and the first thing he did was buying our tickets, on a ship leaving Alexandria on 31 December. My happy husband informed me that he had purchased the most expensive tickets he could find. Since the Suez Canal was closed we would be travelling around the Cape, and the trip would take 32 days. Wasn't it marvellous? Exactly like a luxury cruise, before we started our new life in Sydney.

Still, it was almost November and we had not yet received our papers. I began to pray for a miracle. Real tragedy had spared me so far; why couldn't my brother be cured and our papers lost forever among the many files scattered through the labyrinthine Mugamma'? Maybe we could get Coffee back. I promised that if these things happened, I would never, ever complain. Nothing would be too hard or too tedious. I would become a perfect cook and go to work full-time to support us. Henry could concentrate on his golf swing. I did not care if he never put in a day's work for the rest of his life. I made vows, fasted and refrained from drinking coffee and smoking for whole days, but to no avail. Henry was back on his daily trips to the Mugamma', pretending not to see my unhappiness. Then my mother and brother arrived, followed soon after by my sister. My brother came to live with us for a few days. He was completely crushed. The prospects were not good and he was only 23. I can't really recall how I felt when I saw him and how I found the words to talk to him, but I remember praying intensely during that period. Henry was optimistic, saying that my brother would be saved in the end. I resented his confidence and envied it at the same time. And then I decided to strike a bargain with whoever was ruling us from on high. I would go willingly to Australia for my brother's life to be spared. From then on I felt a miraculous peace descend upon me. It would have been much easier to give up my life than to go away, so I considered that I had offered the ultimate sacrifice.

My husband, very frustrated with the Egyptian bureaucracy, which seemed to take great pleasure in the constant delays, finally fell ill. His joints swelled and he ran a high temperature. Still, he used a cane to drag himself to the Mugamma' and then crawl from one office to another, patiently collecting the new and different documents alleged to be missing from our file.

At last he appealed to his friend at the Australian embassy, who gave him a letter stating that, if we were not given our papers, the embassy would find itself forced to give us a temporary visa that would allow us to leave as foreigners. After that, things began to move.

Our papers arrived on Christmas day, the last one I thought I would ever spend with my family. I packed in three days, working around the clock because we were running short of money and could not afford professional packers. Among the many things I never forgave my husband was his refusal to pack my daughter's toys because they were too bulky. I was reminded of Patsy, who had taken the same route 25 years before and had been forced to leave her playthings behind. Many of the toys had been my sister's, and mine and they represented the last tenuous thread that would still link my daughter to my home. We made hasty arrangements to leave our apartment to my mother. Most of the friends that were still in Cairo had stopped talking to us once the word was out that we were leaving permanently. We had become a threat to their safety. Many were secretly working for the Mukhabarat, and would have found themselves in an embarrassing position if they had been forced to report that we were smuggling money or precious objects out of the country. Others avoided us to preempt accusations of conspiracy or of trying to convey information to be transmitted overseas. At any rate, our good-byes were brief, mainly involving caddies at the club and the people at the Australian embassy who had helped us so efficiently.

On the last day, we went to the club and walked around for a while. It was no longer what it had been: the grounds had suffered severely from neglect, the greens were parched and trampled by the young men and women of the civil defence squads; the famous Lido had been abandoned to a few scrawny stray cats and the plump, glossy black crows. We roamed around the city, feeling that it had died without anyone noticing. Finally we drove back. We did not feel like talking to my parents, who were travelling with us to Alexandria the following morning to see us off, but we wanted to take a last look at the house. Unlike the rest, it did not seem changed. The magnolia still raised its proud head to the sky and plenty of greenery concealed the ageing masonry. But then I noticed something missing. "The kites," I said. "The kites have gone." We looked into the upper branches of the eucalyptus tree, but could see no nests. An ominous silence surrounded us, and my heart contracted painfully as I thought of my family, and how much they would miss me and I them. I felt their anguish as if they were the ones leaving and I was being left behind. I began to cry. "Come on," said Henry. "Maybe the kites know they are no longer welcome in this country. Maybe they have become redundant, like us. I would not be the least bit surprised if they, too, have flown to Australia."

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